you laugh like you've never been lonely by bluepeony

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King
Genre: Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - No Pennywise (IT), Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier Are Best Friends, Comedian Richie Tozier, Friends With Benefits, M/M, Rating May Change
Language: English
Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris
Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2019-10-25
Updated: 2019-12-12
Packaged: 2019-12-13 02:04:54
Rating: Mature
Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Chapters: 6
Words: 22,249
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

On paper, Richie's life couldn't get much better. He's in his twenties, he gets to live with his best friend in a big city, and by some miracle, someone is actually paying him to be funny.

The reality is: he's very lonely, and sort of broke, and he's managed to fall in love with the person he's only supposed to be having casual sex with. It's kind of a mess. And he's going to tell jokes about it.

Also known as: a modern AU where Richie is a small-time stand-up and Eddie is the barman who doesn't love him back.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> Did somebody say modern twenty-somethings-in-the-big-city AU? No. But here it is anyway. Inspired by too much Tig Notaro (if too much Tig Notaro is a thing).
>
> Warnings for mentions of drinking and having sex while drunk
>
> Title from Bones by Ben Howard

“My name is Richie. It has been for twenty-six years. I want to clarify that because I think, sometimes, people think that I gave myself a nickname to make me sound more like a comic. Because ‘Richie’ sounds like the name of someone who, you know, eats bananas with the peel still on, and ‘Richard’ – which is what’s on my birth certificate – sounds like a very heterosexual budget analyst. He sounds like the kind of person who vacuums his artificial lawn. We all had that one neighbour, right? Richard. No offence to any Richards in the audience. It’s just that you’re all terrible people, and my life has been one long continuous effort at distancing myself from you.

So ‘Richie’ is what my mom has called me, as far as I’m aware, since the day I was born. Which means that at some point between signing the birth certificate and leaving the hospital, she must have had a kind of clairvoyant flash forward to what I would end up looking like, and sounding like, and realised that someone who looked like me, and had my voice, would not be able to handle the sheer gravitas of a name like Richard. She knew someone who looked like this would not be heterosexual. Or interested in lawn maintenance. So she was like, *well, yeah, I mean I guess ‘Richie’ sounds like he could be pretty inept. Let’s go with ‘Richie’.*

My dad, on the other hand, doesn’t call me ‘Richie’. Or 'Richard'. Or ‘Rich’. Or even ‘Ricky’, which, you know. That one's not ideal, but it's certainly an option. No, actually. My dad calls me ‘Dick’. And I didn’t

think there was anything weird about that, until he dropped me off at school one day, and he said goodbye to me using that name, and my friend Stan said, "...Why does your dad call you Dick?" To which I replied, "Because the name 'Dick' holds common usage as a variant of 'Richard', Stanley." Which, in hindsight, was actually an incredibly Richard thing to say.

And my friend thought about this, and he looked at me, and he said, with something close to sadness, "He knows he doesn't *have* to call you that, right?"

**

"I don't think you're as funny as you used to be."

"Thanks, Bev."

"Not in real life. I mean on stage."

"Oh! Thanks, Bev."

"I don't mean it in a bad way."

"I'm not sure how you could've meant it in a *good* way."

"I just mean, your jokes are better when you have a boyfriend."

"Right. I'll work on that."

It's 2a.m. They're sitting on the counter of their tiny kitchen, eating Cup Noodles and listening to the couple in the apartment below argue about who lost the house rabbit by letting it out onto the fire escape. Beverly always sticks her head too far out of the window to eavesdrop and bashes it off the peeling frame on her way back in. She does it now, slopping ramen over her pyjama bottoms.

"Ouch! Dammit, I *just* washed these."

Richie hands her the paper towels, then leans behind Bev to close the kitchen window so her nosiness doesn't cause further physical harm. The couple downstairs have already loudly cracked the case of the missing house rabbit anyway; *he* opened the fire escape window to

piss outside because *she* was taking too goddamned long in the bathroom. So. *Adiós*, Thumper.

Beverly gives up on the sweatpants stain and stuffs the paper towel into her empty noodle cup. Laundry is a painstaking process for Bev. She refuses to pay $3.75 to use the washing machines in the basement laundry room. Instead, she submerges her clothes in the bath with a big scoop of Purex and a long umbrella for stirring, then wrings them out and leaves them to dry on the radiators, so that the apartment is constantly decorated with snaky black tights and stripy leggings and floaty cotton dresses, all reeking of Mountain Breeze.

Their place is very small, and Bev is sort of messy, but Richie is messy too, so they're a decent team. They spent two days when they first moved in painting their living room walls electric green, like they'd seen in an old Mick Jagger movie. They host cramped, smoky parties in there, and live mostly nocturnally, and plough through crime drama box sets and Jiffy Pop on their days off, and tidy up intermittently, and this is how they've lived for two years, and it's pretty good.

"I meant to say. Ben came round earlier," Beverly says, after, when she's brushing her teeth in the doorway of Richie's bedroom. This, too, is routine.

"Oh, he did? That's unusual," says Richie, by which he means it isn't unusual at all, and Ben is always here, and even if he didn't live two doors down the hallway he would probably still always be here.

"He's invited us to a party."

"In honour of..?"

"Him. Because it's his birthday. It's a birthday party."

"Thank you for clarifying." He toes off his boots and flops back on to his bed, and Beverly disappears to spit and rinse, and then returns to sit on Richie's bed and wait for him to stop scrolling through his phone and look at her.

"So we're going, right?" she says.

“Where?”

“To the party.”

Richie holds his phone against his chest, obscuring texts from his mother, and Grindr notifications. “When is it?”

“Friday. This Friday coming, not next -”

“On Friday I might be -”

“You’re not working. I already checked with Bill.”

Richie shrugs, going back to his phone. “Creepy. Alright, guess I’ve nothing else to save me. Party at Ben’s. Rad.”

Beverly flops down onto her side, so her face is right next to Richie’s, like she wants to examine his expression. “Why don’t you *like* him?”

Richie rolls his eyes, trying to keep his phone - and, more specifically, Twitter mentions for tonight’s gig - out of her line of sight. “I like him just fine,” he mumbles, scrolling discreetly.

“You do not.”

“How do you know I don’t?”

“Because every time I mention him you get this suspicious, squinty look in your eyes.” She prods the side of his face, as though to make a point.

“I’m just - don’t *do* that, Bev - I’m severely fucking short-sighted, is all.”

He scrolls to a stop on one dispirited review, barely twenty characters:

First time checking out @caskcomedy tonight. @travis_hines and @RichieTozier were decent. 18% mandatory tip on drinks tho? little aggressive.

What is he supposed to do with this?

In the background, Beverly is still making a case for Ben Hanscom.

“I think he’s sort of cute,” she’s saying. “He reminds me of - you remember that movie *City Slickers*? With Billy Crystal?”

“*Didja see his eyes? He’s got crazy eyes* - that movie?” Richie mumbles, continuing down the demoralising Twitter feed.

“*He’s a lunatic, I’m tellin’ ya*,” Beverly joins in.

“Where are you going with this?”

“I just think,” Beverly says, getting herself comfortable against Richie’s pillow, “he reminds me a little of Billy Crystal in that movie, and I want to sleep with him. Maybe. And Eddie will be there, and I know you want to sleep with *him*, so I think Friday’s soirée is a must for our social calendar.”

And as Richie’s mind casts about for something to say that isn’t about Eddie - and lands on ‘Beverly, how can you wanna fuck someone who’s an active member of a local Ultimate Frisbee team?’ - his mind says back to him, in a child’s voice of glee, *eddieeddieeddieeddie great good yes fine up up up and away where’s my good suit off to the party we go.*

**

Sometimes Richie doesn’t think about Eddie. But a lot of the time he does. A lot of the time he can’t help it, because Eddie is a barman at Cask, and Richie is a paid regular at Cask, and naturally this means they make some eye contact from time to time - mostly at Cask Comedy Club.

But Richie holds - with what he thinks could be deemed admirably resilient hope - that one day, possibly soon, Eddie will realise he’s in love with Richie, and everything will be okay.

Eddie. Fucking tiny and sparkling and delicious. Richie’s already done his part. The falling in love. It happened somewhere between them being introduced to one another at the comedy club after Christmas, and trading quite reasonable blowjobs three nights later in the bathroom at a New Year's party to which they’d both, no doubt

by divine intervention, been invited (it was definitely this, Richie is sure, and not the fact that they both have a mutual friend in Bill, who was throwing the party).

Nobody ever knew about it, with the exception of Beverly who, once Richie'd returned to the party, had pressed one red glitter nail to the blooming purple love bite on his neck, leaned in close, and whispered: "*Slut.*"

Sometimes Richie thinks Eddie doesn't know about it either. A year and a half of radio silence would seem to suggest as much. Like it happened, and Eddie immediately developed amnesia straight after. Richie had brought it up once - only once - when he was sort of drunk and a gig hadn't gone so well, and he'd been a little pissed off, and he'd sat at the bar at Cask with his Southern Comfort and Coke and said ruefully, "Eddie? Eds? Tell me if I'm being unreasonable. But just once I'd like you to acknowledge that this mouth touched that dick as we brought in 2018. Is that fair? Just once I'd like you to look at me with an expression that says *yeah, Richie, that happened*. This feigned ignorance thing? Ain't gonna fly anymore, my dude."

To which Eddie had replied, after a brief moment of silence, and only because no one else was around, "Okay. Thanks for the festive blowjob, Richie. I hope you liked yours. Do you feel better now?"

And Richie had not felt better in the slightest.

Sometimes he thinks love, and his stupid, cacophonous heart, is his least favourite thing in the world.

**

Ben's apartment is exactly the same as Richie and Bev's, but flipped, and without a living room the colour of a soursop.

"Sorry about the mess," is the first thing he says, and Richie can only assume that by 'mess' he means the two pairs of shoes by the front door, and a post-it note stuck to the airing cupboard that says 'don't forget to buy All-Bran'.

"I've been reading this book," Beverly replies brightly, which is how

she starts a lot of her sentences, “about flipping negative sentences to make them positive. So instead of saying ‘sorry about the mess’ you can say ‘thank you for *excusing* the mess’. It means what you’re saying becomes based on gratitude, instead of faults.”

She’s known Ben long enough now that she can say this and somehow make it seem charming, instead of condescending.

“Ah, well,” Ben grins, clearly into it. “Let’s try that again. Thank you for excusing the mess.”

“You’re welcome,” says Richie. He holds up a bottle. “D’you like White Zin?”

White Zinfandel is his and Bev’s very favourite drink. It’s like all the things they love most: cheap, stupid, and a little bit fashionable. They like to lie at either end of their couch on weeknights, stick a straw in a bottle each, and settle in for the evening. If Bev and Ben are going to hook up, Ben is going to have to get used to Zin.

They’ve brought Ben a birthday present - hipster gin - and a card, signed ‘Your Loving Neighbors’, which Bev tasked Richie with buying on his way home earlier today, and had been annoyed both by the design (it’s just a blank white card that says ‘Happy Fucking Whatever’ on the front) and by the fact there was no time to go out and buy another before the party.

Luckily, Ben seems to find it funny. Richie knew he would. He is, he smugly reminds Beverly as they wander into the kitchen, a comedian, after all.

The party is okay. It seems they’ve arrived in the midst of a decent vibe, because they’re a little late. Beverly couldn’t decide between a moss green velvet dress and an aquamarine velvet dress, and then they got into an argument when Richie said they both looked the fucking *same*, and then they decided to do a shot of tequila before they left, not out of any great desire to get drunk quickly, but because they both get a kick out of the little red sombrero bottle cap that measures the shots.

Bill is Ben’s roommate, and he’s in the kitchen when they arrive,

mixing a luminous punch.

“Try it!” he insists, like a child forcing finger-smeared cupcakes on to reluctant adults. “Step right up and try Bill’s Party Punch!”

He’s drunk, then. It’s not surprising, as his punch is mostly just blue Kool-Aid and vodka, but Richie takes a large glass to make Bill happy, and as the smell of it hits him - like a sticky-floored club at midnight - Richie decides he’s in the mood to get shit-faced, and eat a lot of Chinese food tomorrow.

Eddie’s here, like Beverly said he would be. He’s in very form-fitting jeans, looking lovely, talking to someone Richie doesn’t know. Richie tries to play it cool, be aloof, and hot, and not utter anything stupid to or around Eddie, but eventually ruins it by saying, louder than he means to, “I just remembered how fucking funny Herky was in *Jay Jay the Jet Plane*.”

Of course, Richie knows - if only because Beverly has pointed this out to him several times - if Eddie really is the man for him, and Richie’s fairly certain he *is*, he won’t mind the stupid shit Richie occasionally comes out with. He might even enjoy it. Sometimes, when Richie stays after gigs at Cask, and the bar’s not so busy, Eddie will serve him doubles at singles prices, or only charge Richie for every other drink, and they’ll shoot the breeze well into the night, and Eddie will laugh at a lot of what Richie says, even if the laughs are slotted in between shakes of the head, and one particularly recurrent question, “What the fuck are you even talking about, Rich?”

These are Richie’s favourite nights. The problem is, he always ends up finishing his drink, sliding back his bar stool, and saying, “Alright, well. Thanks for the free Jim Beam, man. See ya.” He never knows how to *continue* things, how to *come on* to someone. When he's single, he only seems to be able to initiate sex when he’s drunk, and then Beverly complains at him for sleeping with someone when he’s not in his right mind, to which he demands, “Well, how *else* are you supposed to get it done?”

The first time he had sex he was twenty-one. He downed four shots of tequila, shook it all up in his stomach by dancing to Swizz Beatz, then dropped down next to someone he recognised from his Criminal

Justice class and said, “Please, I want it gone. Just take it.” To which they’d said, “Take what?”, and he’d hiccoughed and clarified, “My virginity.”

So he’s been floating around the party for a couple of hours now, trying to get to know Ben better out of loyalty to Bev, drinking Zin and playing Beirut with Bill and Bill’s hopped-up bro friends, allowing himself to be dragged intermittently by Bev to various groups of people while she says, “Tell that one story, will you, Rich? You know the one I mean,” and all the while he’s felt - and maybe his mind, or his dick, are playing tricks on him here but - he’s felt like Eddie’s eyes have been on him a *lot*.

Richie wishes life didn’t always have to be so fussy. Why can’t he just go over to Eddie and say, “Look, can I just ask, are you eye-fucking me right now, or is it simply the fact that it’s difficult to see anything else when there’s a six foot one man in the room wearing a garish patchwork button-up, drunk on Bill’s Party Punch?”

Reflecting on this, Richie decides he *is* reasonably drunk now, and possibly he *could* say all this to Eddie, but he’s interrupted by a massive teetering cake with sparklers in it suddenly appearing dangerously close to his head, held aloft by Bill, and any potential speech is interrupted by a roaring and dreadful rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ throughout the whole apartment. For some reason, when they get to the ‘Happy Birthday, Dear…’ part, everyone inexplicably sings Ben’s full name. Richie finds this so absurdly funny that he’s still thinking about it when he lets himself out onto the fire escape for a vape a few minutes later.

Cold, fresh, dark air. He holds down the button on his pen and breathes in a lungful of pear mint, glances down at the trash cans way below where two stray cats prowl about, hunting leftover Chipotle. Not for too long because it makes him feel queasy. The city’s too dirty to see the stars, but he looks back up at the sky anyway, at the moon hanging like a big smoky cheese, and behind him the fire escape slides open and shut again, and Eddie appears next to him.

“Hey, Richie Tozier,” he says.

“Hey, Eddie Kaspbrak,” says Richie, pleased that Eddie found ‘Happy Birthday’ as amusing as he did.

Before Eddie came out here, Richie was blowing smoke rings, which he’s quite good at, but he stops now, in case it goes wrong and he looks stupid and has no choice but to jump over the railing.

“That’s a long way down,” Eddie remarks, like he’s considering jumping too.

Richie leans a little over the bars and points, with his free hand, to a window several feet to their left.

“I live in the sky too. Look, that’s my bedroom,” he says.

“No shit? I didn’t know you lived so close to Bill.”

“Yeah, it’s a real treat for him. We made tin can phones once. I didn’t have the idyllic childhood required for such a wholesome joy, so I got a real kick out of it.” He takes a long pull on his pen to calm himself, because his heart’s suddenly kicked up a beat. “You want?”

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke or anything, so I really don’t have any right to be on the balcony at a party. It’s just I realised I haven’t had chance to say hi to you all evening.”

“Oh,” Richie nods, inhaling again, a little frantically, because this means Eddie has sought him out, and his brain doesn’t quite know what to do with that information. “Hi!”

And Eddie does this thing, which Richie doesn’t miss, where he kind of half rolls his eyes, and smiles and says, “Hi, Richie.” It’s an expression Richie has seen on his face before, at the bar, when a girl had asked him if the pint glass she’d been given was the biggest pint glass they had.

“I had to escape anyway,” Eddie explains, turning his back to the railing and leaning his head back a little, so his throat makes a pretty line in the dark. “It’s getting to that point in the night where everyone’s becoming really philosophical, you know? One of Ben’s friends just asked me how old I was when I first knew my name.”

“I mean, it’s a great icebreaker.”

Richie slides his vape into his back pocket and looks at Eddie. He doesn’t want to go back to the party. He doesn’t want any more Party Punch. What does he want? Why, he wants to live, goddammit!

“If you’re bored, Eds, we could get out of here.”

He doesn’t know why he says it, except that his brain can’t keep up with his mouth, and for once he’s kind of glad about it. He thinks, *Good job, mouth. We're well on the way to living now*.

He can’t follow this up with any actual location for them to get out of here to, however. To try to backtrack and suggest a concrete place - a bar, a park, the coffee shop at the end of the street - would be for Richie to confess that he isn’t entirely sure if he’s invited Eddie somewhere innocuous, or just made a sexual come-on, which he hopes he has, or at least hopes it might be interpreted as such, but to put any other thought in Eddie’s head now (the park/bar/midnight coffee etc.) would be to ruin any potential come-on entirely.

Things could go either way, he realises, so he decides to see where Eddie will lead, because letting Eddie interpret seems the safest option at this point.

Eddie interprets it this way: “Okay. Cool. Let’s get out of here. You go first, though. So it doesn’t look obvious.”

And this is how it’s confirmed that they will not leave the apartment block tonight; they will have sex instead.

2. Chapter 2

“I’ve recently come to terms with the fact that I don’t really have the natural ability to select what might be deemed acceptable sexual partners. I slept with somebody recently… I don’t know why that got a laugh, but I’ll take it – I slept with somebody recently who decided, *while* we were having sex, to ask me why I had never had laser eye surgery. And the worst thing about that story is that I responded to the question? As though it were reasonable? It was like, ‘This is great and all, but just out of curiosity, laser eye surgery – interested?’ ‘No. I’ve heard you can actually smell your eye burning throughout the procedure’.”

**

Sex with Eddie is a little like riding the subway at rush hour; any nervous tension tempered by the sheer exhilaration of having been lucky enough to get a seat in the first place.

It’s amazing how quickly a party can make things happen. Eighteen months of pining, and it turns out all Richie had to do was put on a dreadful shirt, knock back some pool punch and kick ass at Beer Pong. And now, here they are, making out on Richie’s bed, in his tiny room, which rattles every time a heavy duty vehicle drives past the building. Killer.

“You’re actually a decent kisser,” Eddie remarks, when they eventually come up for air.

“Thanks,” says Richie. “Sometimes I practise on the back of my hand.” Something like regret flickers in Eddie’s eyes at this, so Richie quickly clarifies, “That was a joke.”

“No shit,” Eddie says, raising his eyebrows. “Do you joke about, like, everything?”

“It’s definitely my preferred coping mechanism.”

“You’re having to *cope* with me? Wow.”

“Not *you*. Just… myself. At all times.”

Eddie picks at a loose thread on the comforter, not making eye contact. “You know, Richie, you can tell me.”

“What? Tell you what?”

“If you’re too drunk to do this. If you’re too drunk, we shouldn’t do this.”

“I’m not…” Richie trails off, as a thought occurs to him: “I’m actually not. It’s just…”

“What?”

“Well…”

“*What*?”

“I’m just wondering, is this weir –”

Eddie claps a hand over Richie’s mouth. “It’s only weird if you make it weird by asking if it’s weird.”

Richie pulls away again to speak. “I see. And because you stopped me in the nick of time..?”

“I saved it from being weird.”

“You did? You’re a champ,” says Richie, and then they’re kissing again, and Eddie slides a warm hand beneath Richie’s shirt and Richie’s brain short circuits, wonderfully, so that for once the world falls away behind him, and he can stop thinking about anything, and it’s bliss.

**

Eddie spends around three hours in Richie’s room. A brief portion of that time is spent having sex (very nice, though slightly retrained sex, as both of them are conscious of the way Richie’s old metal bedframe clunks ungraciously against the wall he shares with the next-door neighbours) while the rest of it is spent arguing about whether or not

astrology holds any truth, whether or not *Terminator 2* truly is the greatest science fiction film of James Cameron's career, and perhaps of the twentieth century, and whether or not the Vatican City is, in fact, a country.

Eddie seems, invariably, to be on the 'not' side of each dispute. Richie plays devil's advocate slightly, because he likes to wind Eddie up, then watch him crack and laugh.

Eventually, though, inevitably, Eddie says, "Alright. I gotta go," in the dead hours of morning, after retrieving his phone from down the side of the mattress. "I've got work in a few hours."

"In the morning?" Richie yawns, stretching. His muscles ache pleasantly. "You work at a bar."

"Yeah, and if you ever dragged yourself out of bed before three in the afternoon you'd know bars everywhere have cursed their employees with new opening times," Eddie replies, pulling on his jeans. "It's 2019, Richie. Brunch is all anyone gives a shit about now."

When he's gone, Richie rolls onto his stomach to compose and delete no fewer than six texts to Eddie. They're all stupid, he decides. Even *get home safe* seems trite, because he sees Eddie all the time and has never felt it necessary to suggest that he can't handle himself on the subway. Eddie can definitely handle himself on the subway. He's little and whippy. Richie pictures him like one of those boxing squirrels he and Stan saw in a taxidermy museum once, fuelled by indignation and moral outrage.

He lies awake for ages. Then, some time later, Beverly comes home, and Richie hears her trip over the doormat, like she always does. She clatters about in the kitchen for a little while, in the way only a drunk person trying to be quiet can, then knocks on Richie's door and pokes her head around, blowing her fringe out of her eyes.

"Hey little bear, your light's still on," she says. "Are you home?"

Richie looks at her for a moment, then indicates the room around him. "Yes, Beverly. I'm home."

“Oh.” Then she rummages around in her bag, and pulls out something wrapped in tin foil. “I brought you some birthday cake.”

“Aw, you did? Thanks, buddy.”

“You want it?”

“Maybe later. Like, when it’s day time?”

“Okay, then. I’m sorry if I get up for breakfast later and accidentally eat it.” She pauses in the doorway, swinging idly back and forth on the door. She’s kicked her heels off in the hallway, and now wriggles her bare toes against the carpet. She scrunches her nose up a little and says, gently, “You wanna talk, Rich?”

Richie doesn’t have to think about this to know what she means, and to know what his answer is. “No, thanks. I’m just really tired. I don’t wanna get out of bed, though. Could you be a dream and grab the light for me?”

Ever obliging, she presses two bright orange fingernails to the light switch by the door and flicks it off.

“Night, roomie,” she says, closing the door against the light from the hallway, until Richie’s bedroom is swallowed by pitch blackness.

**

The next day, Richie tries to get cash out to buy coffee from the place at the end of the street, and use the change to wash his bed sheets in the laundry room, but the cash point nearest his apartment building tells him to fuck off. The one by the Seven Eleven says the same thing.

Immediately, he calls Bill.

“Have you been paid?” he asks, trying not to sound like he’s buzzing with panic. “I haven’t been paid.”

“I haven’t checked,” says Bill, who sounds like he’s just woken up. “I’m sure it’s fine. Don’t we get paid on the ninth?”

“Yes. It’s the tenth.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he says again and then, perhaps sensing from the lack of response that Richie feels this is very fucking not fine, he adds, “Don’t worry, okay? I’ll check with Dan.”

Dan is the miserly buffoon who owns Cask, whose job includes the task of sending wages out from the payroll account each month. It’s a simple task Dan is often bewildered by. He used to pay cash in hand, but the legal implications of this became even more mind-boggling to him than paying his regulars on time, so now he coughs up payroll taxes like everyone else, and sometimes Richie gets paid when he’s supposed to, and sometimes he doesn’t, and short of leaving Cask where he’s a paid regular, and going back to grubbing around as a grovelling open mic-er or whoring out his friends at Bringer Shows, there isn’t a lot he can do about it.

He could ask Eddie if *he* got paid, but then, it doesn’t seem appropriate, given the whole sexual intercourse situation, which is what Richie’s privately referring to it as in his head. *Hey, Eds, last night was a total blast, so thanks for that, but I was just wondering – can you afford to eat?*

Eddie. The thought of last night comes back to Richie, momentarily, like a soothing flood, and briefly he’s happy, and vaguely excited, until he looks at the wallet in his left hand, with his debit card peeking out of it, and remembers he has no money.

He needs reassurance. When he’s off the phone with Bill, he FaceTimes Stan instead.

“Stanley! Didn't you say you wanted to come down for my birthday in a couple of weeks?”

“Well, you haven’t officially invited me yet, so I –”

“Well don’t *bother*. Because I’ll be *dead*.”

“Oh really?”

Stan’s on his computer at home, curls springing out behind big headphones. He’s only half paying attention to Richie, which is

annoying.

“I have no money,” Richie continues anyway, swerving to avoid knocking a woman and her toy poodle clear into the road. “The only food in the apartment is half a box of Apple Jacks and that weird soup Bev's aunt keeps sending. When I die of starvation, who do you think will eat me first? The mice in the walls, or that big motherfucking Maine Coon that lives next door?”

“I think,” Stan says reasonably, “if you were to die in your apartment, Beverly would go to *some* length to remove your body from the premises. Before any scavenging sets in, I mean.” He pauses whatever he has on his computer screen, and slips off his headphones. “Do you need me to lend you money?”

“What? No!”

“Because if you do I can –”

“Stanley, how long have you known me? I’m not *coy*. You know if I was asking for money I’d do it the old-fashioned way: show up at your house with a gun and a cloth bag with a big dollar sign on the front and say ‘fill her up, bitch’.”

“It’s just I seem to recall us having this exact conversation last month, right down to the Apple Jacks. You ever think about asking your boss to pay you on time?”

“He’s not my boss,” Richie points out. “He’s the very unfortunate gremlin I trust to provide me with rent money every four weeks. That’s how it works; I introduce grubby little students on 2am fall-out spots, and he allows me to eat.”

“So, a boss then. Richie, if this is becoming a common occurrence – and by ‘if’ I mean ‘because’ – maybe you should think about getting another job.”

“What, at another club? I can’t do that. Do you know how long it took me to get my slot at Cask?”

“No, like, a different industry entirely. You know? Retail? Catering?” Stan pauses. “Law enforcement? I could kind of picture that. You’re

certainly dramatic enough."

Richie physically recoils from his own phone, and jumps out of the way of a jogger. "Don't be disgusting. I do this so that I *don't* have to work a regular job. I haven't seen 11am in twelve months, Stanley, and I'm very content with that."

"*Richie*," Stan says, in a way Richie is familiar with, in a way that means *come the fuck on, now*. They've been friends since fifth grade. Stan has been saying his name, just like that, for sixteen years.

"What?"

"Just sort it out." Stan readjusts his headphones, as though he's somehow closed the case, with nothing more than that tepid advice. "So am I coming to your birthday, or what?"

"I already told you, Stan," Richie says, pushing open the door to his building, without his coffee, and without money for the laundry room. "I'll be *dead* by then."

**

Maybe Richie thought life would have worked itself out by now, or maybe he thought it wouldn't but that it would be all the cooler and more bohemian for its chaos.

Here's the truth: sitting at the tiny chipped table in his and Bev's tiny kitchen, eating Apple Jacks, with $23 in his bank account and a growing complex about the guy he fucked last night, is the least cool or bohemian he's ever felt in his life.

He wonders how he got here sometimes. Well, not how he got *here* so much as how he managed to do all the things he thought he wanted to do and still end up feeling like he's drifting out to sea, aimless.

He lives in a big, ear-splitting, effervescent city. Someone pays him (albeit belatedly) to go on stage and share all the bizarre minutiae of what it's like to be a human *in* that city. He has an apartment with possibly the coolest person he knows, or will ever know. They can paint the walls whatever colour they want. Sometimes they get drunk and paint them. They have a kitchen cabinet dedicated solely to

liquor, like all adults. Richie can take a bath at two in the morning if he wants to. He can go to the movies, a couple of streets away, by himself, in the afternoon when no one's around. He goes to a lot of parties. Sometimes, when he's lucky, he gets to bring home really cute, really dizzying people.

And yet, he's twenty-seven in two weeks, and a part of him – a large part – just keeps saying, over and over, *oh… but it's not really what we want it to be, somehow, is it?*

**

When Richie first started on the comedy circuit, in college, hosting was pitched to him like a real treat. The MC sets the energy in the room, people told him; he keeps the momentum going; he's the audience's best friend. He's the funniest guy of the night. And he has to *earn* that spot.

This isn't exactly untrue. But Richie has learned, through what he would now class as quite extensive personal experience, that the host is a lone figure in a big battle. He's the guy on the frontline, between act and audience, mopping up blood and tending to the wounded. He's cannon fodder for the hecklers. His job is to weed out the dickheads in the audience and beat them up just enough that they don't make the first-timers cry, but not so much that they actually cause trouble.

Sometimes he's on form. Tonight isn't one of those times. He lets the audience chatter. He forgets the name of one of the acts. And while his own material gets laughs, it isn't anything he hasn't performed before. When he's finally set free and can go order two Jack and Cokes and a pint of water from the bar, Eddie, who's also working tonight, says, "Why do I feel like you were hating every minute of that?"

Richie replies, behind a sip of his drink, "Because I was hating every minute of that."

And he has no real explanation for this, except that sometimes he loves it and sometimes he hates it, and when the second act starts laughing with stage fright, and the fourth act saunters on stage and

barks into the mic, "*You motherfuckers better laugh at my jokes!*" then yeah, Richie sort of hates it. He hates saving these people.

"I liked your bit about Buffalo Bill's erogenous zones," Eddie says, wiping down a clean glass for Richie but waiting, like he always does, to make the second drink, so it's still fizzy by the time Richie drinks it.

"I've used that bit, like, six times, man."

Eddie shrugs. "I dunno, I still get a kick out of it." He laughs to himself, putting the glass down, like he's remembering. "It's just," he chuckles, shaking his head, "so fucking stupid."

Richie wants to tell him he's cute. He wants to thank him for being an unwilling audience member at around one in every three shows he does, and still laughing at the same tired jokes. He wants to ask why it's been five days since they slept together, and in that time they've only briefly texted (and barely flirtatiously) and Eddie has Liked only *one* of Richie's Tweets, all of which are frankly *golden*.

Instead, Richie says, "Can you do that thing where you twist the orange slice into the whiskey?" as Eddie pours ice into his second glass.

"Oh fuck," says Eddie, like he's just remembered something important. "You don't want orange. You wanna know where it's really at?"

"Always."

"*Cherry*. You're gonna wanna try this."

Eddie mixes the whiskey and Coke with blood-thick cherry liquor, then Amaretto, then tops it off with a healthy dose of Jägermeister. His deft hands work expertly; it is, Richie has always thought, intensely sexy, the way Eddie mixes drinks.

That said, whatever he's made is not a sophisticated concoction. Richie sips dubiously.

"It tastes like I just swallowed Halloween," he says.

“Isn’t it awesome? Bill showed me. It’s called a Cannibalized Christian. Wait, hold on.” He turns to look behind himself, and with a flourish produces a maraschino cherry.

“Fuck it,” says Richie, “let’s have a little umbrella too, bartender.”

“How about a swizzle stick?”

Richie knocks back another mouthful and swirls the crimson fizz in his glass. He points at it. “This drink is absolutely horrible. I love it.”

“Want another?”

“No, thanks. I think I can feel my teeth rotting in my head. Are you trying to get me drunk, or just hyper?”

“Isn’t that a quote from *The Graduate*?”

“No, it’s a common misconception actually,” Richie replies. “The real quote is ‘Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to get me drunk or hyper, aren’t you?’ And then you say, ‘Richie, I am not trying to get you drunk or hyper. Would you *like* me to get you drunk or hyper?’”

Eddie smiles a little, screwing the cap back on the Amaretto.

“Would you like me to get you drunk, Richie?” he says, but he looks Richie right in the eye as he says it, and he might as well be saying ‘would you *like* me to seduce you, Richie?’ To which Richie would reply, ‘For the love of God, *yes*!’

He reflects on this later, when he’s walking home, on why everything has to be dressed up just to avoid saying anything directly. Why can’t they all just be honest? It would make things so much easier. Why can’t they just say ‘Hello! I’d like to take your clothes off, if you’ll allow it. Please let me know if you’d like to take my clothes off, and we’ll get this show on the road’.

Then again, honesty isn’t always conducive to good sex. Richie once hooked up with a guy who pointed to an old scar on Richie’s stomach from a childhood fence-hopping accident and told him, “You’d be a lot sexier if you didn’t have this. It looks like aliens took your organs,” and Richie had had a complex about it for weeks.

Perhaps Eddie is feeling that directness should be in vogue too, though, because as Richie's walking, his phone buzzes with a text from him that says:

Now I think about it, we really should get drunk together some time

Even at three a.m., exhausted and in dire need of a shower, Richie can't keep the stupid smile from his face as he types out a response.

ok but I'm a busy man. when were you thinjgb?

**thinking*

Eddie doesn't reply for a while, and Richie's pretty sure he's fucked it. He drags on his vape anxiously like an asthmatic. Fucking cherry cola flavour, naturally.

Minutes pass. Yeah, okay. Fucked it. In his defence, 'we should get drunk together' seems an odd thing to text someone, out of the blue, if you aren't actually expecting the other person to pen you into their diary there and then.

And then, joy of joys, his phone vibrates in his jacket pocket only seconds after he's resignedly shoved it back in there, and Richie almost drops it pulling it out again.

I'm not working Friday. are you?

Richie responds, perhaps a little too quickly:

I'm not. it's a date.

This time, Eddie doesn't take ages to reply.

That's a little presumptuous

3. Chapter 3

“Anyone celebrating a birthday tonight? Nobody? Is anybody celebrating *anything* ? Funeral? Divorce? Bah Mitzvah? They make me ask, and I honestly could not fucking care less. Some audience members get really offended by that. *Oh, you don’t care that it’s my birthday? You don’t care that it’s my ‘special day’?* I honestly fucking don’t, I’m sorry. I just think after twenty-one, birthdays should be done, man. Because by that point, you’ve earned all the fundamentals you need to get through the crippling miasma of despair that is the rest of life: sex, alcohol, and gambling. Birthdays after twenty-one are just younger people smugly trying to console you. *Don’t look so sad. I know the dirt nap draws ever closer, but I bought you a bath set, so come on. Chin up*. When I turned twenty-six, the first thing my roommate said to me was ‘don’t panic’.

So by some miracle I have yet another birthday coming up next week - thank you, but you don’t need to cheer. I haven’t achieved anything. Unless, like, not dying counts as an achievement. Which, incidentally, was an End of Year Class Award I received when I was nine, so my birthday wouldn’t even be the first time I’ve been recognised for that feat.

I guess I’m not really into birthdays because when I was growing up, my parents refused to give us special dispensation for them. My mom was obsessed with the idea that if my sister and I were congratulated for our birthdays, we would grow up believing that we didn’t have to work hard to receive recognition. All you had to do was remain living. Which, as I’m sure you can imagine, sets the bar pretty low. Occasionally, for ‘milestone’ birthdays, we would get cards. So, for instance, for my 18th birthday she gave me a card which just said ‘18’ in huge black letters on the front, like a judgement. Or maybe a warning. 'One quarter of your life gone. Tick fuckin' tock.' And when I opened it, it just said, ‘Mom. Hi.’”

**

“So are you gonna tell me? Are you not gonna tell me? Am I gonna have to live the rest of my life forever wondering, speculating, agonizing?” Beverly shoves a huge forkful of pancakes into her

mouth and, with some difficulty, begins to chew.

“I’m going to need you to elaborate,” says Richie.

So Bev, after swallowing (hard), elaborates, “Did something *happen* with Eddie? After Ben’s party?”

“Happen?”

“You know.”

“I know?”

“Was there a little barneymugging? A little buckwilding? Did you churn the butter? Dip the wick? Dance in the sheets?”

“Oh, you mean did we do the hibbety-dibbety?”

“*Exactly*.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?” Richie takes a long drink of coffee, and he doesn’t stop until the mug is empty. When he puts it down he says, finally, “Well. What do you think?”

She considers this. “I think yes, but I wouldn’t like to assume anything.”

“Oh, please, assume away.”

“So is that a…?”

“Yes, obviously,” says Richie. “I had sex. It happens sometimes.”

“Oh *good*,” says Bev, like a mother who’s just been told her child made the track team. It’s how she responds to a lot of Richie’s menial triumphs. ‘Oh *good*, you finally watered that ficus’. ‘Oh *good*, you actually like something someone Tweeted about you’. ‘Oh *good*, you got dressed today’ - and so on.

She says, “So that means now you’re…?”

Richie stares at her. “Slightly less encumbered by self-loathing than I was on Thursday?”

She rolls her eyes and pushes her plate towards him. “You want my leftovers?”

“Not now you’ve drowned them in half a bottle of Jo-Lo, no.”

“Are you guys gonna meet up again? Go on a date? When was the last time you went on a *real date*, Rich? Oh, was it when that guy took you to the aquarium and you dropped a whole Big Gulp in the stingray enclosure?”

“Sometimes you talk, and I don’t know why you do.” Richie considers Beverly’s leftovers, as he always does, and just as quickly gives up on the mess of them. He pushes her plate back towards her. “We’re going for a drink in a couple of days. I mean, it’s not a date. In fact, I’m fairly certain there’s no romantic implication whatsoever.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I like him! So of *course* he’s not gonna feel the same way. Of course he’s gonna spend the whole night saying ‘bro’ and ‘dude’, and ‘bro, be my wingman while I fuck the dude on the door’.”

Beverly blinks, and resumes work on the leftovers. “That is oddly specific.”

“Let’s just say I’ve had some experiences in the past.”

“Honey,” she says, picking up her fork. “I wish you wouldn’t do this.”

“Do what?”

She reaches across the table and takes hold of his hand with her free one. “This whole *oh, woe is me, no one’s ever gonna love me because I’m so tortured and pale, and did you know nobody’s ever been twenty-six before? I’m the* only *one, and you can only be loved if you’re twenty-one and a hundred and ten pounds*.”

It is, Richie concedes, vaguely amusing, and he tries not to give her the satisfaction of him laughing.

“Okay, well, first of all, fuck you,” he says instead. “Obviously.”

“No, you know what? Fuck your bad attitude, Richard,” she says primly. She points her fork in his face. “Yeah, I said it. And what? I’m no Alfred Kinsey, but I’ve slept with enough men to know some fundamentals of sex, and one of those is that you have to be at least marginally attracted to someone to go back to their place and get your dick out in front of them. Apparently that’s fairly elementary.”

“Oh, he’s *marginally* attracted to me? He’s marginally attracted to me, everyone! Let’s go to fucking Sears, I’m gonna set up my wedding gift registry right away!”

Beverly groans, and buries her red hair in her hands.

“You’re impossible.”

She says this, but later, when they’re at the counter paying for breakfast, she bumps her hip against Richie’s, lightly, no hard feelings. He bumps his hip back, and she smiles at him.

“I’ve had an excellent idea,” she says, tugging on the hem of his shirt.

“Pray tell,” says Richie, pushing a quarter into the candy machine on the counter and twisting it until a handful of sour candy rains out.

“You should invite Eddie to your birthday party.”

“Hm.” He shoves one in his mouth, then offers them to her. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“It’d be weird.”

“Weird how? He’s friends with Bill, he’s friends with Ben, we all like him, you’ve hooked up with him, like, a bazillion times -”

“Right. I mean, it was twice, so.”

“I think that more than qualifies someone for an invitation to a birthday party, don’t you?”

“Okay, please don’t call it a birthday ‘party’, because I’ll be three

years away from being thirty, and the thought of calling that anything even close to a 'party' is so depressing it makes me wanna puke."

"I mean, you're eating Super Sours like they're peanuts, so I'm not really sure if your argument that you're too 'mature' for birthday parties really stands."

"I *am* too mature. I'm mature as fuck now. At best it's a birthday get together. A gathering."

"A birthday assembly."

"Precisely. A birthday... convocation."

"A symposium," Beverly nods, and she subtly knocks Richie's hand, which is holding a twenty, out of the way, and hands her money across the counter instead. "What do you wanna do for it anyway?" she says seamlessly, not even addressing the gesture.

"I don't know. I don't wanna make a big thing of it. Can we just get drunk in our pyjamas and watch *Cops*?"

"I mean, that sounds thrilling, but I was thinking something less like what we do every night, and more like booking a table at that Lebanese place you like?"

Richie shrugs. "Yeah, or that." He peers across the counter. "Hey Mike? Do you like Lebanese food?"

Mike looks up from where he's counting Beverly's change out. Mike is the steadfast gentleman who owns Screamin' Beans, the 24-hour cafe at the end of Richie and Bev's street and the sole source of their breakfast food if they're ever awake together before midday. They've known him for two years, and in that time he has never once failed to humour them and their idiocy, whether it be at ten a.m. over breakfast, or two in the morning, drunk and demanding the kitchen's leftovers.

Richie tries his best to ask him a stupid question every time he sees him. Yesterday it was 'Why do people say things like 'Godfather Part One' and 'Godfather Part Two', but no one ever says 'Shrek One' to

distinguish it from its sequels?'

Mike is ever patient.

"Remind me again what Lebanese food generally consists of?" he says.

"Oh, you don't already know? Okay, let's see." Richie counts on his fingers. "Hummus. Baklava."

He pauses.

"Manakeesh," Beverly offers.

"That one," Richie nods. "Would you like to come to my birthday symposium for some manakeesh? Some baklava?"

"Richie, you're one of my favourite customers, but I do not want to go for baklava with you and Beverly on your birthday."

"That's fair."

"Swing by on the day, though. Maybe you'll get some free pancakes. *Maybe*."

Richie's current financial situation what it is, he needs all the free breakfasts he can get. When they leave the cafe he briefly grabs Beverly's hand and gives it a small squeeze, a thank you to her for footing the bill. Again. He's finally been paid, but after rent and bills and a new phone to replace the one he accidentally dropped on the subway tracks, he's almost back to square one.

Of course, *not* eating 80% of his meals outside of the apartment might help, but what's he supposed to do? Cook?

"Thanks for breakfast," he tells Beverly. "And sorry for being a cynical asshole, like, all the time. I know I am. I can hear my fucking stupid self."

"It's just what happens when you get old," she jokes, squeezing his hand back. "Don't worry. I'm getting old too. We can be cynical assholes together."

**

When Richie and Beverly first moved into their apartment together, they'd taken a break from unpacking to head down to Screamin' Beans for the first time. They'd sat in a little two seater table by the window - what would later become *their* table - and Richie had rambled on excitedly about their new place, and their new neighbours, and the sweet gig Bill two doors down had promised to swing him at the comedy club he worked at, and the ficus Richie was going to water to glory. Richie and Beverly had made solemn promises to decorate tastefully and cook from scratch. They would invest real time and energy in their work, and watch thoughtful docuseries, and permanently stock semi-expensive wine in their fridge.

A few hours after they get back from breakfast, once Beverly has left for work, Richie lies on the old Ikea rug in their green living room, one hand in a box of animal crackers, the other wrapped around his vape pen. Occasionally, he lets the pen dangle from his mouth while he flicks between windows on his laptop: Twitter, to job searches, to YouTube, back to job searches, to an Amazon page that tells him he can buy 1.4kg of Barnum's Animal Crackers for $121.

Beside him, a notebook lies open with two things scribbled at the top of the page:

murder is ok when superheroes do it

maybe fetishes are genetic and we just don't know it??

This is the sum total of his new stand up material. He has invested as much time and energy in his work as he's currently physically capable of. He rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling of their ugly living room, blowing idle vapour rings.

"If there's one thing I've learnt from Marvel," he says aloud, to himself, "it's that murder's fine when you have a cape." He points his free hand up at the air, at an imaginary audience. "Good one, Rich. Comedy gold. If there's *one* thing I've learnt from -"

His phone buzzes with a text, and because he knows it will be Eddie,

he immediately rolls over and grabs it. He knows because they've been texting back and forth all afternoon. It started when a couple of hours ago Eddie texted, '*I'm sending you this because I know you'll know who I mean, and nobody else will. I just saw Dennis Hopper in Bloomingdale's*'.

And Richie sent back, '*I don't know how to tell u this but dennis hopper died nine years ago so unless you saw a ghost you got the wrong old man. What are u doing in bloomingdales? '*

And Eddie had replied, '*Sometimes I just like to come in here and look at shit I can't afford. Also I know I saw Dennis Hopper but we can agree to disagree*'.

And Richie had sent, '*I don't understand what we're agreeing to disagree to. he is literally dead?? '*

Which in turn sparked a two-hour long conversation about *Easy Rider* , and *Apocalypse, Now* , and whether or not it was acceptable for Richie to class *Speed* as his favourite film of all time, and whether or not Sandra Bullock is actually immortal, and whether it would be imprudent for Eddie to buy a thirty dollar Thierry Mugler bath bomb. Then Eddie admitted that actually he hates baths, and bath bombs, and anything to do with immersing oneself in gunk, and he was only attracted to the bath bomb because it looked like a geode, and he fucking *loves* geodes.

If someone asked Richie to write a list of all the reasons he's absolutely enamoured with Eddie, one of them would be that he fucking loves geodes. Others might be:

1. The way he purses his lips when someone says something stupid, like he has to physically stop his mouth from opening.
2. His very faint New York accent, which only comes out when he drops his Rs, or talks a mile a minute (which he does a lot).
3. His utter lack of regard for interrupting the flow of a conversation. Eddie will say 'what?' as many times as it takes to hear what somebody is telling him. It's like he doesn't know that smiling and pretending to understand is an option. He wants all of the information, always.
4. How his hair curls a little at the nape of his neck when the bar

gets hot.
5. The way he bites his tongue when he laughs.
6. His obsession with classical cinema and Old Hollywood, and his unnerving ability to identify just about any English language movie made before 1969.
7. The tiny freckles across the bridge of his nose and his big, big brown eyes, and his dimples, and the tiny gap between his bottom teeth, and the tiny scar that cuts his left eyebrow in two.
8. His ridiculous and consistent insistence that they can agree to disagree on matters of fact.

Richie somehow manages to wile away three hours texting him on the floor, and when his phone buzzes against his chest for the thousandth time and he picks it up, he doesn't even think before swiping to unlock it, and in doing so inadvertently answering a phone call.

“Oh shit,” he mutters, because it's not Eddie. He sighs. “Hey, Dan.”

“Rich!” comes Dan’s voice on the other end. “You, uh… you picked up?”

“What can I say, I’m feeling amiable.”

Dan deals with not knowing what ‘amiable’ means by ignoring it. “So listen, we’re having a little switcheroo on the rota this week. How would you like to work on Friday?”

This is why Richie usually ignores Dan’s calls and texts him instead. The immediacy with which he’s expected to respond to a new rota is simply too overwhelming.

“Friday? This Friday? Uh, well… uh… I guess I could open? I could open. Is that okay?”

“No, I don’t need you to fill a slot, I need you to host. Is that alright? So we’ll start usual time, get here for about eight, finish around two. But if we set up early enough we’ll offer a few minutes to whichever little rosy-cheeked open mic-ers wanna queue outside, so maybe you should get here for seven instead. That cool?”

Richie takes a deep breath. “I can’t do that, I have plans. I can’t - I can start for you but I can’t - not the whole night.”

“Seriously? What plans could possibly be more important than another wonderful night of magic at everyone’s favourite comedy club?”

“Well.” Richie sighs, and momentarily presses the edge of his phone into his forehead, hard. “Okay, what night am I getting off?”

“What?”

“You said it was a ‘switcheroo’.”

“Right. Well. Technically, I can’t give any of your nights to anyone else. The guy we had booked for Friday has just dropped out… like, completely. Of his whole employment contract.”

“So it’s not a switcheroo at all,” Richie says flatly. “It’s an adderoo. You hoodwinked me.”

“Look, weren’t you just chewing me out, like, two days ago over how I don’t give you enough money? Now I’m giving you more and you’re pissed?”

Richie pulls a face he wishes Dan could see. “The issue was that you didn’t pay me on time, not that I want to work more than six nights a week.”

“Oh man, you *millennials*. You know, when I was your age, I was shovelling snow on the weekends in Idaho on *top* of my full-time job.”

“Dan, first of all, you’re thirty-two, you're not a baby boomer. And secondly, you’ve never fucking lived in Idaho. Stop telling people you lived in Idaho.”

“Okay, so I’ll see you at seven on Friday?”

“Sure! Hey, maybe set up a little tent for me by the side of the stage, I’ll just live there.”

“You know, Richie,” Dan says, levelling his voice, “one day I’m not gonna put up with you being a little bitch to me anymore. I’m going to put someone else on your slots. You can’t talk to your employer like this.”

“You just called me a little bitch! I could take you to the EEOC, you know.”

“Good luck with that, Rich. I’ll see you on Friday. Oh, and by the way? I *did* live in Idaho. I lived in Sun Valley. Okay?” Then he rings off.

“Fuck you, Sun Valley,” says Richie, tossing his phone across the rug.

He groans. He knows that he doesn’t have to take the work. And he knows that even if he didn’t, Dan wouldn’t stop booking him, not unless Dave Chapelle wandered in asking for a job.

But he *does* need the money. The question is, does he need the money *more* than he needs to go for drinks with Eddie?

He’s an adult. He supposes he should be making adult decisions.

So dan just called me, he texts, after writing and re-writing the message sixteen times.

You answer Dan’s calls? Eddie texts back. *That's gross*.

I didn’t mean to. And now i have to work on friday. I said no but he said yes, so u know. I'm sorry. can we raincheck?

Hmm. Nah, sorry.

It’s a joke. Richie’s fairly certain it’s a joke. It must be a joke. Only it’s difficult to tell, so he doesn’t respond, and then he hides his phone under a sofa cushion when it gets too painful to look at. Then it buzzes a short while later, vibrating the cushion, and it’s Eddie saying: *Joking. Yeah, that’s fine*.

And Richie, who talks for a living, doesn’t know what to say to that. Doesn't know how to respond if he isn't being given a time, and a place, and definite clarification that he's not an asshole for going to

work. He puts his phone back under the cushion. And he tries not to think about the fact that he's choosing work over the person he's probably irrevocably in love with. And he tries not to think about the fact that he's so tired of sitting on this fucking rug, on his own, waiting for something to start.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> Warnings for drinking and very, very brief mention of drugs.

“My best friend Stan is a little older than me. He’s twenty-seven years old, and he recently got ID’d trying to buy Kombucha tea, Elmer’s glue sticks, baking soda, and half a tank of gas. He called me, very upset by the whole thing, completely abashed that anyone would ask for ID from a twenty-seven year old man before they would allow him these particular purchases. I explained to him they probably just wanted his name and address out of concern over whatever janky fucking bomb he was clearly planning to make.

But me, I’m younger. I’m twenty-six. Which is partly why I’m friends with him. And a few weeks ago, I went to buy a six-pack of Mike’s Hard Lemonade. For which I had personal reasons.

And I felt, perhaps naively, that this purchase alone ought to have made my age apparent. It did not. The girl serving me had one of those checkout systems, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen them, it’s where the cashier has to declare and, like, key in how old they think the customer is? And I guess it’s so that if they’re wrong and it comes back on them, they can say, ‘Well, I thought he was of age, I thought he was, you know, twenty-two, maybe twenty-five…’

I happened to glance at the screen where it was showing the age she’d assumed for me? Thirty-eight.

And I realised, in that moment, that she probably thought that the likeliest scenario for me being in that store was that I was a thirty-eight year old man who had been threatened into buying a six-pack of Mike’s Hard Lemonade for a group of Freshmen loitering outside the door.

And it’s like, once you have that kind of knowledge about yourself, that that’s the kind of vibe you give, where do you go from there? What positive message can you glean from that situation? I mean,

you think life can't get any worse, and then that happens? I haven't slept in weeks."

**

Stan visiting is probably the best birthday present Richie could ask for (except perhaps a year's paid rent, or requited love). Stan, standing there on the train station platform, with his shrewd eyes and permanent beanie, wearing the sheepskin denim jacket he's had since he was seventeen.

"Stan! What are you doing here?" It's the same thing Richie says every time he comes to pick Stan up from the train station, and Stan is still yet to show any outward sign that he finds it amusing. Instead he hugs Richie, hard, and says, "God, I missed your dumb self. Happy birthday, you old, old man."

As luggage he's carrying a small backpack and nothing else. Stan has never been great at packing. He'll probably end up wearing something of Richie's to go out in, and then complain about it.

On their way back to the apartment Stan talks about college. He's in his second year of a Master's programme at Brown, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, because he's smart as anything and always has been. He tells Richie about his back-breaking term paper, and his university's new state-of-the-art lab with LCD screens on the walls that integrate with his laptop and make his heart sing, and the decades-old professor he's pretty certain he has some sort of weird, slightly Grecian erotic fixation on.

"But what about you?" Stan asks suddenly, as they round the corner onto Richie's street, passing Screamin' Beans.

"What about me?" Richie says, and it comes out a little defensive even though he doesn't mean for it to.

"What's going on in your life?" Stan clarifies, which is a strange question, really, because they talk every day, and it's not like Richie is in the habit of leaving out anything funny, or stupid, or weird. He always wants to make Stan laugh. At this stage, it's pretty much one of his only goals in life.

Perhaps Stan doesn't mean that kind of thing, though. Perhaps it might be a cue to confide in him all the *other* stuff, the stuff that's been sending Richie dizzy the past few weeks, but Stan's just travelled from Rhode Island, and he doesn't deserve to have Richie's problems jettisoned on to his shoulders, does he, so Richie just slings an arm around his shoulder as he pushes the door to his building open and says, "Oh, I have plenty of erotic fixations too," and then changes the subject and says, "So are you still trying to be vegan? Because Bev got the most *awesome* birthday cake for me, but I have to warn you it's, like, 90% cream cheese frosting."

Richie never fully appreciates how much he misses Stan until he's here, in Richie's apartment, or Richie is there, with Stan at college. He watches Stan potter around the place, chattering away with Beverly, graciously accepting her awful fruit teas and a frankly gargantuan slice of birthday cake. In twenty years not a birthday of theirs has gone by that they haven't spent together, except for the Fall that Stan turned eleven and was whisked off to Gran Canaria by his parents, and Richie had actually cried.

"So what's the plan for tonight?" Stan asks, finally surrendering his cake plate with a quarter of a slice still left.

"Well," Beverly pipes up from the kitchen, overhearing, "first of all, Richie's going to let me give him a haircut -"

"I'm not," Richie tells Stan.

"A little short-back-and-sides moment -"

"I'm -"

"Little '80s pompadour moment -"

"Not."

"And then on to a fine dining experience at Café Beirut," Bev says, sticking her head round the door, "and lots of tequila. Do you like manakeesh, Stanley?"

"Love it," says Stan, clearly clueless.

“If I had it my way he'd be getting a proper party, but I don't have it my way. I fought for one, like the Beastie Boys said I should, but to no avail.”

In a way, Richie feels bad for denying Bev what would be, for her at least, the joyous experience of throwing him a birthday party this year. Which is ridiculous, because it's *his* birthday, and the right to party, or indeed *not* party, should very much be in his hands.

It's just that Beverly is so extremely *good* at throwing parties. It's the lifeblood of her social calendar. In fact, Richie has said - and Bill's said, and Ben's said, and random gatecrashers from parties past have all said - that Bev shouldn't be an Assistant Operations Manager at Macy's. She should be a party planner.

For Richie's twenty-fifth birthday, she'd thrown him an old-fashioned surprise party, aghast at finding out he'd never been given one as a kid. There'd been Pass the Parcel, where every layer of newspaper revealed some new and twisted drinking challenge. Drunk Twister. A huge pinata shaped, quite predictably, like a dick. And right beneath Richie's nose Bev had skilfully orchestrated a mass game of Bingo for every guest, complete with actual ticket pads and daubers, wherein a prize could be won for whoever racked up every Richie-ism first: circle when you hear Richie describe something as "bitchin'", circle when Richie brings up his ceaseless and painful sexual attraction to Jeff Goldblum, circle when Richie asks Alexa to change the song to ‘No Diggity’, circle when Richie says he doesn't want to do a shot but immediately does one anyway, circle when you hear Richie talking about *Red Dead Redemption*, or Sandra Oh, or his enormous dick, or *Speed*. Double points if he describes *Speed* as the greatest film of the 20th century.

Let it never be said that Beverly doesn’t love Richie inexplicably, and wholeheartedly. She always seems to want to bring out the best in him. Even if that just means blindfolding him and making him whack a giant straw cock full of Sour Patch Kids.

He won’t let her anywhere near his hair with an electric razor. But before they go out, while Stan is still napping off his train journey in the living room, he lets her sit him down in her bedroom and comb his hair into something resembling a style. She drags product through

it, something waxy and blue that worries him.

But when he glances in her thrift shop vanity mirror he looks… well, okay actually. He might even say… *good*. What's the word? Coiffed? He's almost tempted to hand over the razor and say: *Alright, I trust you, buddy. Turn me into an androgynous '80s waif*.

He doesn't, obviously. Still, Beverly insists that even at twenty-seven he needs to stay on the cutting-edge with his appearance. She makes him put his contact lenses in, and wear the boots with the pointy toes that he never bothers with because they pinch. He clicks the ends of them together uncomfortably.

"Is this all really necessary?" he says, taking them off and resolving not to put them back on until they leave the apartment. "We're only going for dinner."

Beverly looks at him. She bends slightly to put a hand on his shoulder. She looks him in the eye. He blinks back, left eye slightly fuzzy because his contact lens prescription is a little out of date now that he wears them so infrequently.

"It may be a cliché, Richie, but all the truest things are. Age really is just a number. It doesn't mean shit in and of itself. But asking 'are these super fucking cool vintage thrift shop boots really necessary'? *That*," she says, "that is the kind of thing that's going to make you old, my friend."

**

Only going for dinner.

Only going for dinner, plus four rounds of drinks and one revolting on-the-house shot of arak for each of them, which Stan has to go and throw up in the gents.

Only going for dinner, then on to the smoky little bar next door for a quick one, just to see what it's like. Just a quick one. A quick *two*.

Only going for dinner, then on to a club Bill's heard is supposed to be *unreal*, with lithe aerialists on raised platforms and glitter raining from the domed magenta ceiling, where everything starts to get a

little blurred...

It's called Heaven, or Nirvana, or something celestial anyway. Music booms from speakers concealed in its vast and endless round walls; a dull, thud-thud trance to begin with, which morphs into tropical house remixes of old disco songs as soon as midnight hits. Richie's lost his friends. He's been adopted by a group of ten or fifteen strangers, all glistening and gorgeous, a little unreal-looking, and terribly friendly. The club is expensive, but they keep buying him drinks because someone, not Richie but maybe Bill, maybe Bev, let it slip that it was his birthday, and now they all seem to think it's some kind of superpower, having a birthday, and that it warrants lavish praise and gifts and shots, endless shots, and they cheer with raw, unbridled joy every time Richie does one, and he thinks *yes, I am a fucking superhero, look at me go*. The song switches to a thrumming remix of George Michael's 'Freedom! '90', and a girl beside him shrieks and grabs Richie's arm gratefully, as if the song had been his idea.

"*All we have to see is that I don't belong to you, and you don't belong to me!*" she screams in his face. Then they're all doing it, throwing their drinks into the air: *Freedom! Freedom! FREEDOM!*

Then there's a hand on his shoulder, a hand on his waist, and a boy, sweat-drenched and elfin, is turning him round and spitting a glow-in-the-dark whistle out of his mouth to shout over the music, "Hey! HEY! I've seen you!"

"I don't know," Richie shouts back, shrugging wildly. "Maybe!"

The boy moves in closer to shout in Richie's ear, nodding passionately, a finger against his chest, "I've seen you on *American Horror Story*."

"That's not me. I'm not famous," Richie tells him, and even drunk he's clear-headed enough to be slightly concerned over which gruesome actor he could possibly be being mistaken for. He sort of wants to ask the guy which season he means, just so he can whittle it down a little.

But it's okay. It's okay. The boy clarifies, "You should be! You're

hot!" And then he's putting both hands on Richie's shoulders, drawing him in and licking his lips which flash blue in the strobe lights. His eyes are large, pupils dilated. "Listen! We should take E together!"

"Oh!" says Richie, disappointed. He thought something more fruitful might have followed 'you're hot', but no - just boring old drugs. "No, thanks. I'm only into the hard stuff. I popped, like, four God's Speed caffeine tablets before I came out, so I'm pretty wired."

The joke is wasted on the boy, who rolls his eyes and immediately loses interest, wandering off into the writhing crowd. Richie looks around for Beverly, for Stan and Bill, for Ben, but he can't see any of them. His new friends jostle him, trying to get him to join in again; the DJ's on to a confusing house remix of 'Rock the Casbah' now, but it's no good. The mention of drugs has jolted Richie out of the moment, like a spell's been broken. Not because he's bothered by drugs particularly, but because he's suddenly found a point of separation between himself and the sprawling, sweaty hands all around him. Self-consciousness has reared its head, and now, somehow, he feels a bit of a dickhead with this crowd.

He makes for the smoking area, and bar a few feeble protests, nobody really cares. It's cold outside, fresh and wonderful. He sits on one of the benches and stretches his long legs out. His toes, in his boots, are killing him. He longs to take them off and lob them clear over the balcony. Music thrums dully behind the door. He fishes his vape pen out of one pocket, his phone out of the other. There are texts from Beverly and Stan, asking where he is. A belated birthday Facebook message from his sister. Likes and replies to a picture he tweeted from dinner. The caption was 'once every full moon me and these creeps congregate and take a rare photo together. look at this!!'.

Eddie, who's working tonight, has replied.

'It's not a full moon, so you need to go home'.

Eddie. *Eddie*. *Why* didn't Richie invite him? Eddie, with his lovely brown eyes and deadpan jokes. What could possibly have possessed Richie to believe inviting Eddie to dinner could have been anything other than a good idea?

Richie takes a drag on his vape and stares at the comment. He's drunk, and with drunkenness comes the compulsion to say sappy things to the guy he likes. He brings up Eddie's phone number and calls him, but it rings for a while and there's no answer.

Richie can just picture him; picking up his phone, glancing at Richie's name on the screen, shoving it back in his pocket, disinterested.

How stupid could he have been, to make it so patently clear to Eddie that he was thinking of him at midnight, and how embarrassing to have had any attempt at early hours sentimental conversation dashed.

Defeated, he's about to go back inside, when his phone starts vibrating in his pocket.

"Eddie?" is what he answers with.

"Are you okay?" is how Eddie responds. Clearly, neither of them have grasped the simple concept of 'hello' yet.

"I'm fine. I'm great!"

"Oh," says Eddie, and Richie hears him sigh, what with sounds like relief. "When I get a missed call from someone after midnight I sort of automatically assume something terrible has happened."

"Well, they just started playing a Keith Urban remix. Does that count?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm…" Richie glances out over the balcony, at the city which is vast and glittering, as though this might help him pinpoint an exact location. "I'm at a club."

"And you're calling me…"

"Oh, you don't want me to?"

On the other end, Eddie laughs. "I'm fine with you calling me. I just wondered if there might be a specific reason."

“Well,” says Richie, and he sits back down on the bench, and takes a long drag on his vape, thinking. “Well,” he says again, “there is. See, I was on Twitter. I was looking at the picture I posted earlier. And I was thinking, fuck. I should have invited you, you know? Why didn’t I invite you? You’re friends with Bill. You’re friends with Ben. *I’m* barely even friends with Ben. I mean, I’m not *not* friends with Ben, but I don’t know him *that* well. It’s just Bev has this thing about him, and his arms, and Billy Crystal, and he invited me to *his* birthday, and… I sound like I’m eight.”

“Richie, it’s -”

“The point I’m making is - sorry to interrupt - the point I’m making is, statistically, you personally know 80% of the people who came to dinner tonight. And not counting myself, because I don’t wanna make assumptions, I know you would class at least 40% of that group as your good friends. I didn’t invite you because I thought you’d think it was weird, but now I feel weird for not inviting you, and I’m sorry.”

Eddie is silent for a moment.

“Uh,” he says, finally. “Well, I’m impressed by your quick math.”

“It has always been one of my strong points,” Richie agrees.

“Richie, I don’t expect you to invite me places because I’m friends with your neighbours,” Eddie continues. “Anyway, I’m working tonight, so it’s not… like, it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not?”

“Definitely not.”

“Okay,” says Richie, nodding, even though Eddie can’t see him. “Good. Okay. What if I said there was another reason?”

“Is there?”

“Come have a drink with me. When you’ve finished tonight? I mean, I kind of owe you for last week.”

Eddie laughs at this, and maybe it’s just because he’s on the phone,

and his voice is so close to Richie's ear, but it makes something in Richie's stomach tug with longing.

"I'm at work, remember? We closed early tonight, thank fuck, but I won't be done until after one."

"So you're telling me that an eight-hour shift making endless Moscow Mules for white girls, listening to Dan scream 'don't mix the sprays up!' and watching sweating open mic-ers go mute on stage in the middle of a mother-in-law joke somehow *doesn't* require a huge fucking vodka tonic?"

It seems to work. Because Eddie, joy of joys, says, "Well. Yeah, when you put it like *that*."

**

Richie has managed to locate Stan and Bill by the time Eddie arrives, which is useful, because he needs Bill to give him the name of the club. And the street name. And general directions to it from Cask. Beverly has disappeared somewhere with Ben, but Richie doesn't want to consider the potential implications of that right now.

He's in the middle of telling them about Elfin Ecstasy boy, when he feels a gentle knock against the back of his knee, and there's Eddie, looking little and wonderful. As Richie burbles, "Hi!" and throws his arms around him, the club - which, Bill has now reliably informed Richie, is called Elysium - suddenly transforms from the half-hearted and perfunctory 1a.m. performance it's been sinking towards into a new and glittering place of promise.

"Guys, it's Eddie," Richie shouts over the music, like they don't already know. Well, in fairness, Stan actually doesn't know him, and as he and Eddie introduce themselves to each other as best they can over a dubstep remix of 'Jolene', Bill pulls Richie to the bar.

"So this is interesting," says Bill. "You know you shouldn't sleep with co-workers, right?"

"First of all, we're not co-workers. We just happen to do our respective jobs in the same building. Secondly, I have no idea what

you're talking about."

Bill smiles. He's drunk, but his eyes are shrewd. Bill can be a ridiculous person at times, prone to outlandish claims and bouts of melodrama, but he never misses a damn thing.

Richie could do without the droll judgement, but he could do with the tips. He's never been a very graceful flirt; mostly he just follows where other people lead, or makes glib observations: 'your biceps are big', 'your T-shirt is funny', 'your teeth are hella white', and so on. 'Your neck is very strong looking, like it could handle a milkmaid's yoke' had once earned him a handjob from a Lyft driver, so it's not a completely ineffectual method of courtship.

He tries not to do it to Eddie, though. Eddie deserves better. Once they've secured, by some small miracle, one of the crushed velvet booths away from the dance floor, Richie tries to focus on being as cool and level-headed as possible.

The problem is, resolving to be cool and level-headed cuts a *lot* out of Richie's entire vocabulary, and he can only watch as his friends sit in a circle around him, licking cocktail straws and laughing over a topic Richie is barely conscious of. He's thinking that he likes Eddie's Joy Division t-shirt. He's thinking he wants to say 'I like your Joy Division t-shirt' but he's firm in his resolve not to make pointless statements in lieu of flirting.

He likes that Eddie always changes out of his work shirt into a t-shirt after a shift, even if it's just to walk home. Richie won't say that either.

He likes the way Eddie bites very gently on the tip of his straw, for the briefest of moments, and usually around a smile at something someone has said, before sipping. Richie *could* bring that up later. There might be something sexy in it if he phrases it correctly, when they're alone, when they're…

When they're what exactly? Richie becomes suddenly conscious of the fact that he has no idea what the plan here actually is. He just knows he wanted Eddie here, he wanted to see him, and Eddie actually obliged, and now Richie's friends are showing him a better

time than Richie is capable of, because he's too wrapped up in the way Eddie's sharp little shoulders look beneath soft, washed-out grey cotton. He's too wrapped up in the way Eddie keeps resting his teeth on that fucking straw.

The more they drink, the higher the volume of conversation around the table becomes, until Beverly - who resurfaced twenty minutes ago, sweaty and pleased with herself, with an extremely pink-cheeked Ben - is literally clutching Bill's hand and pleading with him to 'just give Janis Joplin a try, goddammit'.

And Bill's saying, "I *have*. I like the one about the yellow taxi! The big one!"

And Stan's saying, "That's Joni Mitchell, you *philistine*."

And Ben's saying, "Did she ever find her daughter?"

And Bev's saying, specifically to Eddie now, "Richie and I get drunk sometimes and listen to *Blue*. It always makes me cry. It's very cathartic." And then, just to clarify, in case Eddie might be getting any ideas about Richie not being man enough, "I mean, *Richie* doesn't cry." Then she smiles across the table at Richie, as if she's helped him.

It could be worse. She could be telling Eddie about the they time they got high and Richie couldn't stop crying over Fly giving up her puppies in *Babe*.

Luckily, when they go to the bar together, just Richie and Eddie, Eddie has the good grace not to mention Joni Mitchell.

He just says, "Buy you a drink?"

And Richie replies, "Jack and coke?"

"No, pick something expensive. Seeing as I haven't got you a birthday present."

"Okay. Whiskey and soda, but ask for *that* whiskey up there. The one in the big fuck-off crystal decanter."

“What is it?”

“I have no idea.”

“That *does* look expensive. Like a relic. I think I can see an actual layer of dust on it.”

“Regretting the offer, Eds?”

“No,” says Eddie, and orders two. It is expensive. Very expensive.

“Holy shit,” says Richie, laughing, as the barmaid pushes forward their two measly measures and snatches Eddie’s money, like she’s worried he might change his mind. “Okay, so *that* is fucking criminal.”

“No, it’s not,” Eddie deadpans. “I always pay a week’s rent in drinks. You don’t?” Then he picks up his glass and knocks back half in one go. “Yeah. No fucking biggie. Want another?”

“You serious?”

“Hell no,” says Eddie, and orders two Jack and Gingers. It’s what he always makes for Richie at Cask when Richie is too tired to think of a drink himself. “So happy birthday,” Eddie says, clinking their glasses, “for *yesterday*.”

“Yeah, thank God that’s over.”

Richie glances up in time to see Eddie biting his goddamned straw *again*, like he doesn't even know he's doing it. It’s how he grins at him now, around the straw, that causes in Richie's chest a slightly debilitating squeeze of desire.

They both have one arm on the bar, and Eddie touches his knuckles to Richie’s. The music hasn’t let up much, but they’re close enough that they can just about hear each other without having to raise their voices.

“You don’t mean it, do you?” says Eddie. “All the stuff about hating your birthday?”

The question catches Richie slightly off guard, and he isn't sure how to respond without sounding too serious. Even drunk, though, he knows that whatever he says, he shouldn't be honest. Right now, he's pretty convinced of the idea that nothing sexy ever comes from being honest.

So he says, "Of course not," and knocks back the rest of his drink in one go. It's strong and sharp, and makes him feel gutsy. "How could I? I'm here, in this amazing city, with my friends, with you, for my very own birthday. I've had some very expensive whiskey. Queen just started playing. And Eddie Kaspbrak just told me he wanted to dance with me…"

"That," Eddie says, letting himself be led, "doesn't sound like something he would say."

"Maybe it doesn't, but I know what I heard," says Richie, and as he steps backward, Eddie's hand in his, he feels warm, persuaded fingers tighten around his own.

He doesn't like birthdays, no, but it's not his birthday anymore. It's two in the morning on March 8th, and Richie feels like he'll be just fine as long as everything stays exactly as it is right now.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings: s e x (non-explicit)

“Of course, the problem with being average-looking is that you want to sleep with attractive people like everyone else, but you’re suspicious when attractive people want to sleep with you. Right? It’s sad. It’s like, we all have a fantasy of fucking Henry Cavill, that goes without saying, but you know in reality if Henry Cavill offered to fuck you, your immediate response would be: ‘... *Really*?’ It'd be, ‘Don't do this to yourself, Henry.’

The sad truth is that if you’re average-looking and an extremely attractive person propositions you for sex, there’s likely going to be something disturbing that underlies their physical beauty. There’s always going to be a part of you which knows that by accepting the offer, you’re running the risk of ending up in a crock pot. So there’s a decision that has to be made. And that is: ‘Is this person attractive enough for me to risk being turned into a lampshade?’

When I was in college, I had the unique experience of being hit on by an *extremely* attractive gentleman in a laundromat. And I specify the location just to make it clear to you that he was sober.

Of course a red flag went up for me, because he looked like Ivan Drago in Rocky IV, and I looked like Adrian in Rocky I. But, much like today, I was touch-starved and insecure, so I went back to his dorm. Where of course, my suspicions were confirmed. That he was weird as fuck.

He took my pants off, and then he took my underwear off, and then he just looked at me for a long time. While I just kind of lay there, inert. And then he said very thoughtfully, 'Huh. Looks like you've grown yourself a pretty hefty dick there, fella’. Now, I have to admit I was pleased both by the observation, and the implication that I'd had some kind of pivotal role in the growth and cultivation of my own dick.

Unfortunately, he didn't stop there. He then said, 'Bet your dad has a pretty big dick too, huh?' And maybe it's just me, but I was slightly less into this. I was even less into what he said next, which was, 'God. Your poor mother'."

**

Things don't stay the same, of course. Eventually, inevitably, they have to leave. And Richie does his best to prolong that wonderful, sticky nightclub feeling of self-confidence and uninhibited liberty by crowding Eddie up against the wall by the exit, while the others piss about getting their jackets, and putting both hands on Eddie's face and kissing him. Eddie opens his mouth when it happens, like he's expecting it, and they kiss lazily beneath the dim light by the back door, music from outside and inside all a faint throb in the distance.

It's slow and sweet at first; Eddie tastes like whiskey and sugar and lime all at once. He threads a hand into Richie's hair and and tilts his head, just slightly, and with the new angle his kissing becomes a little more bruising, a little urgent. When they break apart, though not by much, Eddie's lips are cherry-red; Richie can tell even in the low light.

"Do you wanna…" Eddie starts, curling his fingers into the little gap between two buttons on Richie's shirt.

"Yeah," Richie breathes, utterly without the presence of mind to care about how shameless he sounds.

"Go for food, is what I was gonna say," Eddie clarifies. Which is pretty mortifying. "I'm fucking starving, aren't you?"

"I'm… I could eat?"

Eddie kisses him again, lightly this time, then says, "Cool. Let's do it," and ducks away to go and get his jacket from the cloakroom.

It's not too difficult to tell the others he's ditching. Bill isn't wholly interested anyway; he's one more bat of the eyelids away from scoring with one of the glittery aerialists. Beverly, as always, is a little more engaged about the situation.

“You and Eddie?” she says in a low voice, flashing, quite unironically, two thumbs up.

“I don’t know,” says Richie, out of earshot of Eddie. “Maybe. You and Ben?”

“I’m not sure. I think he thinks he’s being anti-feminist by asking if I want to sleep with him. It’s sweet. But it’s also kind of pissing me off.”

Stan, having retrieved his own jacket after a very long and arduous search for his cloakroom token, pops up between the two of them and says, “Well, I hope you both have a *wonderful* time.”

Richie winces. “Stanley. Honestly. Am I a terrible friend?”

“You’re the absolute worst. But will I be sleeping in your bed tonight and eating the rest of your birthday cake? Oh yes, my friend. Yes, I will.”

“I’ll make it up to you. I swear I’ll take you to the most boring fucking museum in the whole city tomorrow.”

“Oh you,” says Stan, patting him on the cheek, “with your empty promises.”

Perhaps Richie ought to feel guiltier than he does, but like any man he is, on some level, inherently selfish and dissolute. He follows Eddie out of the club, into the dark early morning which seems to stretch ahead like a whole new night out. In the briefest moment of self-reflection, Richie crudely considers that if he had a tail, it would be wagging.

**

“I like Stan,” Eddie says, as they walk along together outside. The sky is no longer black but dark, waxy blue, though the streets are still buzzing and alive. “It was nice to finally meet the star of your stand up.”

“The star?” Richie echoes. “*I'm* the star. I don’t talk about him *that* much.” He pauses. “Do I?”

“All I’m saying is, for a guy I’ve only spent about thirty minutes talking to, I know an inordinate amount about his life. He was like, ‘Hi, I’m Stan’ and I felt like saying, ‘Let’s cut the small talk, man, I know you once cried so hard at *Dancer in the Dark* you had to call in sick to work’.”

Richie laughs. “Did I talk about that?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I don’t remember *half* the shit I use, man. If it doesn’t get a laugh, I never use it again. So I guess jokes about Lars Von Trier didn’t go down so well. Weird, huh?”

“That *is* weird. I mean, *Antichrist* is probably my favourite comedy of all time.”

“More of a romantic comedy, really.”

“So what’s the secret to being a successful stand up comedian, if it’s not that?”

“I don’t know,” Richie shrugs, hands in his pockets. “Still tryna figure that one out.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, his shoulder brushing lazily against Richie’s. “Spare me the false modesty, would you?”

“I’m serious,” Richie laughs. “I’m not exactly what you call high-flying, Eds.”

“Oh, so when people come in the bar and ask me ‘Hey, where’s Richie tonight?’ ‘Why’s Richie not performing tonight?’ ‘Everyone keeps telling me to come see this really fucking tall Richie guy’ they’re talking about some other, elusive, seven foot Richard?”

“It’s entirely possible.” Richie’s quiet for a moment. Then, uninhibited, he can’t help it: “Do people really ask that?”

“Sure. When the other performers suck,” says Eddie, and this time it’s deliberate when their shoulders touch, because Richie scoffs and nudges into him.

They seem to be walking for a long time without getting anywhere, and Richie can feel himself starting to emerge from the pleasant haze of drunkenness and into something else. He wouldn't deem this new state sobriety; he's still a little slurry-speeched, uncoordinated on his feet. But the alcohol's magical numbing properties are beginning to wear off and he can feel his eyes starting to sting a little, the muscles in his legs beginning to ache.

"You know, there's a McDonald's, like, a block away," he says.

"No," Eddie says almost immediately, like he's expecting it. "I don't go to McDonald's."

"Oh. Are you… a vegetarian?" Richie asks, fairly certain he's seen Eddie nibbling maple bacon Kettle chips on more than one occasion and wondering if this counts as meat.

"No. It's just that McDonald's is, like, a human Petri dish of bacteria. D'you know people have gotten infections in their heart-linings because of McDonald's?"

"Oh. Well, no, I didn't know *that* -"

"It's a whole thing, bladder infections, skin infections…"

"- But we've just been in a club for like -"

"Sepsis meningitis, pneumonia…"

" - two hours?"

"I know," says Eddie, finally looking at him, "but I'm unaware of the results of any bacterial swab carried out at Elysium, so I can just use a straw and try not to think about, you know, potentially lethal pathogens."

Richie blinks slowly. "I've had way too much to drink to process the kinds of words you're using right now."

Eddie's preferred pathogen-free dining experience is a tiny little takeaway crammed at the bottom of a three-storey townhouse. It's got one stainless steel counter, a tin ceiling, and a very brief, cash-

only menu.

Richie's used to cheap, noisy diners, sizzling and stinking of hot oil. This place is so sterile it's hard to imagine anyone frying anything in here, so Richie's surprised when they're able to shove two boxes of fries with red salt across the counter with startling efficiency.

"We walked all the way here," says Richie, "and you just wanted fucking… fries."

There's no space to sit inside, so they stand outside instead. Eddie looks at him and eats one singular fry in tiny bites, like a mouse. Then another. Beneath the early morning sky, which, barely perceptibly, has begun to lighten, with just the hint of a deep orange sun on the horizon, Richie can see Eddie properly now. His eyes are dark and starting to redden a little with tiredness; his hair is starting to curl slightly at the tips. He rubs one eye a bit with his free hand, and with the other gestures lazily to the box Richie's holding.

"Just fuckin' eat them," he says.

"Fine," says Richie. Then he concedes, "Alright, congratulations, they're pretty fucking good."

"And you won't get sepsis from them."

"That's the real clincher."

"Thanks for coming all this way with me," says Eddie, resting his head back against the brick wall and glancing at Richie sideways. "Even if it was just because you hoped I might invite you back to my place."

Richie chokes a little, partly on red salt, partly on shame.

"I wasn't - I'm not -" How best, he wonders frantically, to insist that he isn't a creep, without sounding like an utter creep?

"Which is fine, because I was going to anyway," Eddie finishes, in a way that's so calm, and so effortlessly confident, that he could be a character in a sultry Marlene Dietrich film, were it not for the way he's fussily rubbing red salt from his fingers, instead of licking it like

a normal person. “I’m about another, I don’t know, six blocks away. That cool?”

And even if sex, it seems, is on the table, Richie can’t help himself. “Seriously, Eddie?”

Eddie just laughs.

“Nah,” he says, and points to the building directly opposite them. “I live there.”

“Oh, good one, you really got me.”

“Would you still’ve come?”

Eddie’s smiling at him; a knowing, sort of sexy smile, which even coupled with slightly bloodshot eyes still sends a pleasant little shiver down Richie’s spine.

“There’s no point me lying, is there?” says Richie.

“Not really.”

“Then yeah. I would’ve. Happy?”

Eddie laughs again, like he’s pleased with himself. With his left hand he reaches for Richie’s face and holds him gently by the chin, and Richie thinks he’s going to kiss him when Eddie pulls him closer, and thumbs very gently at the tiny pearls of salt on Richie’s lower lip.

“You’re fucking… ridiculous, Richie, d’you know that?” Eddie grins, but somehow not like he *means* ridiculous. Like he means attractive, or interesting, or fucking A.

**

Eddie’s apartment is a little like his favourite takeaway, minus the tin ceiling: tiny, mainly white, and mostly empty.

Mostly, because there’s still a TV, and a sofa, and a tripod lamp. It’s not Richie’s style at all, but he appreciates it as the kind of place you might want to lie down, on the big grey area rug on the floor, and

meditate.

“You live alone?” says Richie, noting the stairs leading to a mezzanine with one double bed.

“Uh huh.”

Richie wants to pry, but refrains. Vaguely, he can recall Bill saying something about Eddie’s dad dying, when he was a kid maybe, and leaving him money. In this city, even a dead dad’s inheritance won’t bag much square footage, but it can sometimes afford someone the luxury of living alone. It’s a luxury Eddie seems to have squandered on minimalism and Marie Kondo rules. The only clear mark of personality is a torn-out shopping list on the counter of the kitchenette which just says ‘oat thing (one in the red box)’, ‘clorox’, and ‘BBQ mayo’. BBQ mayo has been underlined twice.

Eddie gets him a glass of water, which is ideal because the red salt has Richie spitting feathers, and he presumes there’ll be kissing soon, and he’s right, there is; he downs the glass, then half of another, and then they’re up against the counter kissing all warm and slow, Richie blindly trying to put the glass down behind himself without breaking it.

They move to the sofa, where the kissing becomes feverish, and slightly tenacious. Richie’s lying on his back, and Eddie’s pushing his head down against the sofa cushion, changing the angle to go deeper, then slowing down again, alternating the rhythm in a way that makes Richie slightly breathless. Eddie breaks away with a small noise and nudges his nose against Richie’s. In between smaller kisses he mumbles, “Do you wanna go upstairs?”

Which is a fine idea in theory, only the reality is that as soon as their bodies hit the mattress they slow right down, become boneless and sloppy with exhaustion, and although they try to pick up where they left off it’s Eddie who pulls away to whisper, rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand, “Can we just… for a second,” and he puts his head in the crook between Richie’s shoulder and neck and promptly falls asleep.

Richie’s not far behind. He drifts on the edge of consciousness, his

eyes growing heavy, closing, then snapping open again when his body complains that there's an attractive man on top of it and it can't just be expected to go to *sleep*.

But he can't help it. He's been awake for hours and hours and hours, and Eddie's bed has the mother of all mattress toppers, and the alcohol has all but worn off now, leaving Richie aching, sleepy, a little stupid...

"*Fuck*."

Eddie jolts awake, leaving a damp spot where his mouth has been. "Huh?"

"Sorry."

"Did I fall asleep?" He sounds almost annoyed with himself. "You okay?"

"Contacts."

"What?"

Richie gestures to his face, sitting up. "I've got my fucking… contacts in."

"So?"

"So I can't…" He's going to say 'stay', but stops himself just in time, not wanting to sound presumptuous. It's not like he's been invited to stick around till morning, after all. He changes tack: "So I need to be careful I don't fall asleep and accidentally blind myself. Are you *laughing*? It's not funny, I have incredibly poor eyesight."

In the grey dawn light Eddie sits up in the middle of the bed, grinning, looking tousled and *really* stupid-beautiful.

"Just take 'em out," he shrugs. "I'll make sure you get home safe. Hold your hand the whole way."

"Fuck you," Richie scoffs, dimly aware that of everything Eddie has said tonight, that's somehow, inexplicably, the sexiest.

His fingers find the front of Eddie's t-shirt and he pulls him in; just as Richie kisses him he touches his hand up beneath the t-shirt and sweeps his palm over Eddie's stomach and around to his back, where he pushes the t-shirt up further, and it's kind of hot the way his hand almost spans the width of Eddie's lower back.

Eddie seems to have forgotten his exhaustion. Or at least, he's merely treating it as a minor inconvenience as he eases himself forward into Richie's lap, and tangles his fingers in Richie's hair and kisses him stupid. When they come apart for breath Eddie nips very gently at Richie's lower lip, panting a little. His hair's a mess, lips a little swollen. It's honestly wonderful. He hooks two fingers into Richie's belt loops, and with his other hand pushes Richie's chest until he's lying down again.

Richie gives in and lets his head fall back against the pillow, just as he feels Eddie push his shirt up and begin pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses around his navel. Richie hauls himself up onto his elbows to watch, dazed, as Eddie makes short work of his belt and fly. The belt lands with a dull thud, buckle-down, against the carpet, his jeans are roughly tugged down just enough, and Richie's last, semi-coherent thought before Eddie goes down on him is *happy fucking birthday to me*.

The thing about sex with Eddie is that Richie is so hopelessly head over fucking heels that all he wants to do is touch him all over, everywhere, and at the same time not do anything that could even be slightly construed as disrespectful. This is to such an extent that when, at one point, Eddie looks up at him, eyes dark, and says, "You can pull my hair if you want," Richie almost reacts by saying, "Oh, thank you."

Richie's starting to learn, now that they've done this a few times, that unlike a lot of the men he's had the reasonable pleasure of fucking, Eddie isn't *frantic* when it comes to sex. He's *slow*. Works with precision. Almost stopping, then starting again. Like they have all the time in the world. He sucks a dick the same way he makes a cocktail, as if led by some self-imposed, almost artistic obligation to get it just *right*.

And he does get it right. Extremely right. Despite Eddie's penchant

for leisurely sex, it really isn't long at all before Richie comes, and all he can manage in the face of this is a rather unsexy, "Sorry. Fuck. D'you want...?"

Eddie rolls his shoulders lazily and stretches, says, "I won't come," in a matter-of-fact, entirely Eddie sort of way, then adds, around a yawn, "You can owe me."

"Deal," Richie mumbles, completely boneless.

"Take your contacts out," Eddie reminds him. He gets up and pads off to the adjoining bathroom to brush his teeth, and when he comes back he gets under the covers and nudges his foot against Richie's leg, hard, and says, "Take your fucking contacts out."

So Richie gets up off the bed, legs a little like jello, and goes to Eddie's bathroom to get rid of his contact lenses and splash cold water on his hot face. He puts a little toothpaste on his finger and rubs it around his teeth in lieu of a toothbrush, feeling his hangover start to creep up on him before he's even gone to sleep, a dull little throb beginning to peek from behind his eye.

When he goes back to bed, Eddie is curled up beneath the covers, eyes closed. He opens them when Richie gets in next to him.

"Sorted?"

"Sorted."

"Goodnight, then," he says softly, voice a little muffled by his pillow.

Richie rolls to face him. "It's, like, 5am," he says, tugging one of the too-many pillows out from beneath his head and tossing it to the end of the bed. Beneath the covers, his knuckles brush Eddie's without meaning to, but Eddie doesn't pull away.

"It is?" Eddie murmurs, and then he sighs, and pulls his duvet up to his face. "Fuck. Alright. Good morning, then."

"Good morning, Eddie," Richie says, before closing his eyes, and falling asleep more instantly than he means to.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thank you for all the lovely feedback on the last chapter (and thank you heather for u know what)

“I’m definitely an extrovert. I mean, there’s always been a positive correlation between my mental well-being and the amount of attention I’m being given. And yet despite this, I find it difficult to be truly emotional in front of other people. And I already know why this is, I don’t need a therapist to tell me it’s because I have profound daddy issues. But, like, those are issues which also make me super kinky so, you know. Swings and roundabouts.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t cry. Oh, I cry. I just have the decency to do it on my own time, and not subject others to the abject horror of being in the presence of somebody fucking snivelling. Because I’m not selfish.

Which is good, because frankly I am an *ugly* crier. Like, fucking disgusting. Think: The Toxic Avenger. Like you remember that one kid in middle school who’d get forced to do cross country and cry so hard he’d throw up? Here he is now. It’s me.

I remember once being at home over winter break when I was in college, and my boyfriend at the time broke up with me over text. Which was a lot harsher back then because you didn’t have like, quite so many little emojis to soften the blow. You know, you couldn’t just throw an innocuous fucking peace sign at the end of everything. I think his exact words were: ‘I’m out. Get over it’. But if he *had* been able to send an emoji with that, it definitely would have been that laughing-crying one?

Anyway, so *I* wasn’t laughing-crying, I was just crying-crying. I was in my dad’s car, driving to Little Caesars in the snow to get Crazy Bread for my pregnant sister, and I was *sobbing*. And I *mean* that. This was not serene, slowly trickling silent tears on a night drive. I’m talking heaving my guts out in the middle of the day while sitting in standstill Christmas traffic in the centre of town.

And maybe at that point there was some kind of internal battle going on between my emotional issues and my innate instinct to perform, because, no word of a lie, despite the absolute trauma I was experiencing over my first heartbreak, the instant that Gwen Stefani's 'Hollaback Girl' came on the radio, I started singing? Just to clarify, I didn't stop crying to sing. The hideous crying was a kind of syncopated accompaniment, if you will. It was pretty jazzy. I got as far as 'this shit is bananas, b-a-n-a-n-a-s', just completely fucking bawling and snot-faced, before I kind of folded in on myself and let my head hit the car horn. You know, just as a kind of nice, long final note.

So. All in all, I think I took the breakup pretty well."

**

Eddie keeps his promise and walks Richie home the next morning. It started raining horribly around dawn and still hasn't stopped, so the gesture feels extra sweet. It isn't far, but they're both hungover, so it means a lot when Eddie pulls a t-shirt on, bleary-eyed and messy-haired, and says, "Alright, let's get your blind ass home, shall we?"

He lives near the subway station, and as they sit together in the car which, for a Sunday morning, is suspiciously empty, he asks, "Is your eyesight, like, *really* bad?"

The car lurches, and with it Richie's fragile stomach. He groans.

"My eyesight?" he says, pinching his aching forehead with two fingers. "Yeah, I guess it's pretty awful."

"Since when?"

"Since, I don't know… I've always had glasses."

"Even as a baby?"

Richie looks at him. "No, Eddie, I didn't have glasses as a baby."

"I knew someone who was born with water on his brain and he had glasses when he was a baby."

“I didn’t - I wasn’t born with water on my brain.”

The car rattles loudly, and Richie just about possesses the presence of mind to be annoyed that he can’t focus on enjoying the way they’re sitting together, knees touching, and how if someone looked at them they might think they were a couple. He can only focus on his desperate need for his toothbrush, a shower, and his bed, in that order.

“You’re lucky you suit glasses,” says Eddie. “That’d suck if you didn’t, huh? I think you look okay without them, but you’re cooler to look at when you have them on.”

Richie’s noticed this before, this city boy habit Eddie has of giving backhanded compliments. It had been one of the things Richie liked most about him when they first met; not the backhanded compliments so much as what they were borne of, which is a seemingly innate inability to bullshit people.

That said, it also puts Richie a little on edge, because it means if he tells a bad joke, or wears an awful shirt, or looks better with his glasses on, Eddie will just tell him. Richie had been working once not long ago when Eddie and Bill were sharing a shift. At the bar, he’d overheard Bill ask, “Do you think I should try to get that girl’s number? The one with the unbe*liev*able blue dress?” and Eddie had replied, without a hint of brotherly joviality to suggest he was joking, “Uh. No, I wouldn’t bother.”

They get off at Richie’s usual stop, and though muscle memory carries Richie most of the way he can’t say he isn’t pleased when every so often, usually when they’re pausing at a busy corner to cross the street, Eddie will gently steer him by the back of his arm. By the time they’re at Richie’s building the rain’s let up, but they’re both wet through.

“I feel horrible I made you walk in the rain with me,” says Richie.

“Yeah, you should. I’ll probably get pneumonia now, so thanks,” Eddie says, with no bite. He puts his hands in his pockets and flashes Richie a half-smile. “Just remember to bring your glasses next time.”

Richie stands there with one hand on the bar of the front door, not sure what to do next.

“Do you wanna come in? I could get you a towel? So you don’t, you know. Die.”

Eddie smiles, properly now. “You don’t have to pretend like you’re not dead on your feet, Rich. I know *I* am. So I’m gonna go home, run a painfully hot bath, and sleep in it. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Uh, well -”

“At work?”

“Right! Yeah. Absolutely.”

Richie wonders if it would be right to kiss him. He quickly concedes that it probably wouldn’t, though he isn’t sure why. It’s strange; last night he couldn’t *stop* kissing him. Fast forward five hours and suddenly they’ve lurched into a whole new world where the only appropriate options now somehow feel like a hug or a fist bump.

They settle on a hug, and when Eddie’s gone Richie pushes on the heavy door with his shoulder, which is aching and weak, and stumbles towards the elevator. He feels, rather than sees, the number 4 on the buttons.

He slouches into the apartment, and then his bedroom, and Stan, who’s in his bed, says brightly, “*There* he is,” and immediately launches into a plodding rendition of the theme from The Newlywed Game.

“Please don’t sing when I’m dying,” Richie groans. “It’s not proper.”

He picks his glasses up off the nightstand, puts them on, lifts back the covers and gets in next to Stan, pausing just long enough to toe his horrible boots off before flopping back against the pillow with a sigh. Then he takes his glasses off again.

“Could you get your big fucking leg off me?” says Stan, tugging the covers back towards himself.

“Okay,” Richie says, eyes closed, kicking him feebly under the duvet, “first of all, this is my bed. Secondly, if you’re naked, I’m gonna be mad.”

“It’s very comfy. I think I’ll stay.”

“Yeah? Have a nice night, did you?”

Stan pokes him, hard. “Did *you*?”

“Very pleasant, thanks.”

“Good, I’m glad. We both had great nights, then. You were out getting laid, I was lying here at four in the morning while your neighbour’s fire alarm went off for an hour. When I asked Bev if we should do anything, she said it ‘happens all the time’ and you guys never go round there or say anything because you’re ‘afraid of getting knifed’?”

“Exactly. And that’s solid advice you can take with you anywhere, Stanley.”

They lie there for a moment, the traffic rattling loudly down below, and Richie’s just debating whether or not he has the strength to get aspirin from the bathroom when Stan says, “So are you going to give me any details, or..?”

“Do you *want* details?”

“I just want to know if you cried, threw up, or made any love confessions.”

Richie counts on his fingers. “No, no, and nearly.”

“That’s pretty good for you!”

“Fuck you,” says Richie, kicking him again. “He let me stay over, so we’re basically engaged.”

“Can I be your best man?”

“I guess so.”

“Can we have the bachelor party at Six Flags?”

“What is your obsession with Six Flags?” Richie snuggles further down into the duvet, and Stan does the same, so they’re lying face to face, like they’re ten again. “I think I’m in love, Stan. It’s very painful.”

“I’ve heard it’s supposed to be. What are you going to do about it?”

Good question, Richie thinks. What *is* he going to do about it? It’s only as he’s lying there, Stan watching him expectantly, that he realises what Eddie actually said to him earlier.

“Just remember to bring your glasses next time.”

Next time.

Next time.

**

So this is what happens: on Wednesday night, Richie stays with Eddie on the close-down after a gig, and they go back to Eddie’s for a night cap, and they end up having sex.

Then the following Sunday, Richie asks if Eddie wants to come over to watch *Wild Wild Country* on Netflix because Bev isn’t in and he doesn’t think he’ll concentrate if he watches it alone, but they both seem to share an unspoken understanding that they won’t be watching *Wild Wild Country* at all, they’ll be having sex, and they’re right, they don’t watch it, and they do have sex.

This happens several more times (and not always with a documentary-based ruse, it has to be said), and it’s at this point Richie is able to admit to himself that where before there was nothing, they’ve now established something.

“So it’s pretty much just sex?” Beverly says, when Richie tries to explain it to her.

“No,” he says, even though, largely, it is.

It's not like they don't talk in *between* the sex, and it's not like it's always *full* sex, and it's not like Richie doesn't sometimes look at Eddie, sleeping next to him afterwards (always under a big mess of blankets, his head just a tuft of dark hair peeking out the top), and feel like his heart is trying to pummel its way out through his chest.

"I see," is Beverly's somewhat dry response. "Well, it sounds very promising."

Richie tries not to mind that Beverly doesn't support his new and frankly exhilarating venture. It doesn't seem very fair when she was the one who was encouraging him to sleep with Eddie in the first place, all those weeks ago at that stupid birthday party, only now that he's doing it regularly it's somehow a problem? It's like when she showed him how to reheat chicken and rice using damp paper towels, and now she gets mad every time he microwaves leftover Chinese takeout.

He says as much, and she rolls her eyes.

"Richie," she says, a bit sternly.

"What?" he says.

"Be *careful*."

But he can't help it. He doesn't want to be careful. It feels like something good is finally happening to him. It's bliss, it's exciting, it makes him feel *happy*. Genuine, lush happiness, almost metamorphic in its ability to make Richie want to do and be better. He blitzes the apartment, chucks out the wine-stained rug and the fucking ficus. Buys new bedding and underwear. Finds out whatever aftershave Ben wears and gets the same one. Then feels creepy, and swaps it for a different scent by the same designer.

And this is the thing, this is the *thing*, Beverly; it's not just physical.

Alright, it is for the most part, but sometimes it's so profoundly *intimate* too that Richie feels like he's in some beautiful French film, like that weird one Eddie put on one night about the wannabe criminal and the girl with the pixie cut, all cigarette smoke and white

bed sheets and wonderfully pretentious conversations. One morning he watches as Eddie pads about in just his boxers and Richie's t-shirt, mindlessly peeling an orange, licking juice from his thumb beneath this dappled spring sunlight, and Richie isn't thinking anything in that single, wonderful moment except maybe *oh Christ*, and *that hurts*, and *this could be a fucking French film*.

And what about last week, Tuesday night, Eddie's panic at finding what *he* called a tumour, and Richie called an ingrown hair, on his stomach? With seemingly no mind for the sheer lack of sex appeal involved, he hoiked his t-shirt up and insisted Richie check it out and give him a firm diagnosis, as though Richie were perfectly qualified to do so.

"I mean, it's an ingrown hair, Eds, I get them all the time."

"It's *solid*, though. Look - feel!"

"It's a fucking ingrown pube, okay, I don't know what else to tell you."

"Why would I have pubic hair *there*, asshole?"

"Because you get pubic hair on your stomach! You may have noticed over the years that it doesn't just stop at the top of your dick."

"Yeah, up *here* maybe, in a *line* - it doesn't just decide to fuck off North-East when it feels like it, Rich."

And what's checking out each other's pimples if not intimacy?

Once or twice they stand at the sink and brush their teeth at the same time, and if movies have taught him anything it's that *that* has to count for something, too.

And whereas before Richie could only glean the things he liked about Eddie from work and parties, now he has a whole new private world to catalogue: the way Eddie snuffles and mumbles in his sleep, puts his face in his hands when he's tired, rubs his thumb slowly over his nose when they lie on the couch, like he's trying to soothe himself to sleep. The way he hates having his ears touched, and shifts his weight from foot to foot when he's washing dishes, or making coffee. And

how he's allergic to tomatoes, but they won't kill him so he still eats salsa and then complains all night about his mouth tingling. He starts play fights he has no hope of winning. He has an impossibly high score on the Tetris app on his phone, and plays it so regularly he often gets the theme music stuck in his head, which annoys them both. He's direct and brash and a bit bossy, especially in bed, and sometimes he curses like he forgets other adjectives exist.

But he's kind too, and practical, and funny, and he gets upset by ASPCA ads on TV, and sometimes, usually when he's on the brink of sleep, he'll tangle his feet up with Richie's at the end of the bed, or squeeze the top of his arm just briefly, and it won't last more than a few seconds before he rolls to the other side of the bed but it's still nice, and these are only little things but Richie likes knowing them, and he likes feeling so stupid in love.

Beverly says that it isn't love, it's infatuation, and that she isn't trying to be cruel but he should know the difference.

"It's like you think you're lucky he even notices you," she says.

And he says, "Well, I *am*."

So the month passes by in this wonderful blur, and they never really talk about what it is they're doing, and they never go so far as to leave a toothbrush permanently at the other's apartment, but in between the sex there's Chinese takeout and Turner Classic Movies and long, pointless conversations held top-and-tail on the sofa. The only time they come close to putting a name on it is one extremely lazy, hot Sunday in April, when neither of them have to work. They've been making out for some time in Richie's bed, slow and lazy, sheets everywhere, when Eddie finally rolls on top of Richie, half-hard and grinding down on him, pulling this stupid, needy noise from the back of Richie's throat. Richie squeezes the top of his thigh where it's slung over him, and he's just about to get something started when Eddie says, entirely too conversationally, "What do you think about this arrangement? Do you think it's going well?"

He sounds sort of like a manager at an employee performance review. This is another of Eddie's habits Richie has become accustomed to over the past few weeks. Just as in day-to-day life, mood or context

means very little to Eddie when he has something on his mind, and that's including during, before, or after sex. It's a combination, Richie thinks, of being a New York native, and working nights in a rowdy bar. He's developed social conventions that facilitate serving hordes of terrible people all night, so there's simply no room for euphemism.

And in response to this direct approach, Richie, for some Godforsaken reason even he can't fathom, tries to match it by saying, "Uh, I'd give it, like… I don't know, eight out of ten?"

Eddie frowns. "*Eight* out of ten?"

"I don't know, you framed the question like it warranted some kind of ranking system."

"Okay, well, I wasn't asking for a score, Richie, but as you've given one, in which area are you thinking we could make up these two points?"

"Alright, *nine* out of ten."

"No, no, you said eight, let's stick with eight."

"So just to be clear, you think our current situation is *ten* out of ten?"

This seems to throw Eddie slightly. "Well, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it." He pauses, drumming his fingers absently against Richie's abdomen. "I guess there's always room for improvement."

Richie nods. "Maybe we could talk about that at our next team meeting? You could wait till I'm actually *inside* you for that one."

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Fuck off," he says, anchoring Richie's wrist to the bed and kissing him again.

They stumble from the apartment the next morning, bleary-eyed, and it seems frankly preposterous that they've been hooking up - 'seeing each other' Bev calls it, in an oddly quaint, vaguely British sort of way - for a month now, and Richie's never exposed Eddie to the culinary wonders of Screamin' Beans.

It's in part due to Eddie's reluctance to eat anywhere that he can't fully vet on TripAdvisor first, but he seems satisfied that it isn't revolting when they go in, and he's evidently charmed by Mike, who takes their order, if his dopey grin is anything to go by. It's a common effect Mike tends to have on people, and one Richie's not too concerned by.

"So do you come here because it's outside your apartment, or did you rent your apartment because it's outside here?" asks Eddie.

"Any and all living arrangements I make are based on proximity to my favourite diners, yes," Richie nods. "No, I mean, it's weird. You think when you move to a big city you're gonna spend all your time eating in these really eclectic, bohemian places, and the truth is I either come here or a terrible ramen place, like, two blocks away. You know the town I grew up in had *one* independent restaurant? And all they served was hot dogs and mozzarella sticks, and Stan's Jewish, so we couldn't even go."

"You couldn't eat hot dogs and mozzarella sticks with anyone else?"

"Don't make the mistake of underestimating how much of a loser I was as a child, Eddie. If I went up to another kid and asked if they wanted a Roller Derby Diner hot dog, I'd've probably gotten a roundhouse kick to the face."

"That could be your TripAdvisor review: 'Hot dogs so bad they make you wanna roundhouse kick someone in the face'."

Their food arrives, and Eddie slides his phone out of the way. It vibrates with a message, which he ignores.

"I was more or less a loser in school too," he admits.

"I mean, that's not really a surprise," says Richie.

Eddie quirks an eyebrow. "It's not?"

"Well, you have a personality. And a sense of humour. No one popular ever comes out of high school with a personality or a sense of humour. They come out of high school thinking Friends is funny."

Eddie laughs and, thankfully, seems somewhat pleased by the comment. He starts talking about how, after his dad died, he was never allowed to do anything; go on field trips, or attend sleepovers, or go trick or treating, or dissect a frog in Biology, or watch any cartoons on MTV. He became a social outcast by being confined to his bedroom and Disney films, although he wasn't allowed to watch *The Aristocats*, because his mom thought it was too sexy.

And Richie, who already knows from Bill that Eddie's dad is dead, has to pretend like he doesn't.

"I'm sorry about your dad," he says. "That's really sad."

"I mean, it *is* sad but I don't remember him, so I'm not cut up about it. Do you still have both your parents?" says Eddie, framing the question in a way only Eddie would.

Richie blinks. "Uh, yeah. Well, I think so. Haven't spoken to them in a while!" Then, feeling he ought to clarify: "We're not weird or anything, they just struggle with FaceTime."

Eddie's phone buzzes again. This time, Richie notices what he thought he saw the first time, which is a little red flame in a white box at the top of the screen. Eddie doesn't even look at it as he deftly switches his phone to silent, and puts it in his pocket. Richie isn't sure what to read into more: the Tinder notification, or the fact that Eddie put his phone away to talk to him. Surely the latter says more than the former, but maybe that's wishful thinking.

"And they live in Maine?" Eddie says swiftly, like the conversation never stopped.

"For some reason, yeah."

"Why did you leave?"

"Because I wanted to go to college here."

"What did you study?"

Richie's still trying to shake off niggling thoughts of the phone message, and isn't really thinking when he says vaguely, "Something

pointless, trust me. I didn't graduate."

Eddie considers this, picking a fork out of the cutlery tray and checking it for marks. "So are you doing what you wanna do now?"

It's not the question Richie expects, because usually the question people ask is 'why did you drop out, you absolute moron'. He tries to think of a suitable answer, but his mind goes blank.

"In some form," he eventually decides. "I don't know, I guess I always have this feeling I could or should be doing something else with my life, but the universe isn't telling me what it is. Like there's some big secret I'm not in on. I could be a spectacular retail manager and we'd never know."

"Unless you got a job as a retail manager."

"I don't know, I get the feeling that's *not* what the big secret is. I prefer to think of it as something more like 'you should be writing a memoir' or 'buy more lottery tickets'."

"If that's what you want it to be, why don't you just do it?"

"That's a good question. I don't know. There's just something sort of mildly paralysing about your twenties, isn't there?"

"Don't I know it," says Eddie. "I've worked in bars for the last five years. No one knows career paralysis quite like me."

"Okay, what would you do, then? If you could do *anything*?"

"Anything?"

"*Any* -thing."

"Anything, God. I don't know. Just something that makes me happy, I guess," and Eddie's voice when he says it is so soft, and the sentiment is so touching, that Richie's about to say something equally profound when Eddie suddenly grabs Richie's arm and adds, "*Or* I'd be a Lego sculptor. They make, like, forty grand a year just building shit at Legoland. Like I said, I never left the house as a kid, I'd be *killer* at that. And d'you know what *else* is a real job...?"

At this point, Richie isn't even eating his breakfast. He's sitting with his chin on his fist, lips slightly parted like an idiot, thinking that Beverly must be wrong; he must be in love. Because for twenty-seven years he hasn't been able to shut up, but now all he wants in the world is for Eddie to just sit in front of him, like this, with his wonderful eyes and his wonderful hands and everything, and talk, and talk, and talk.